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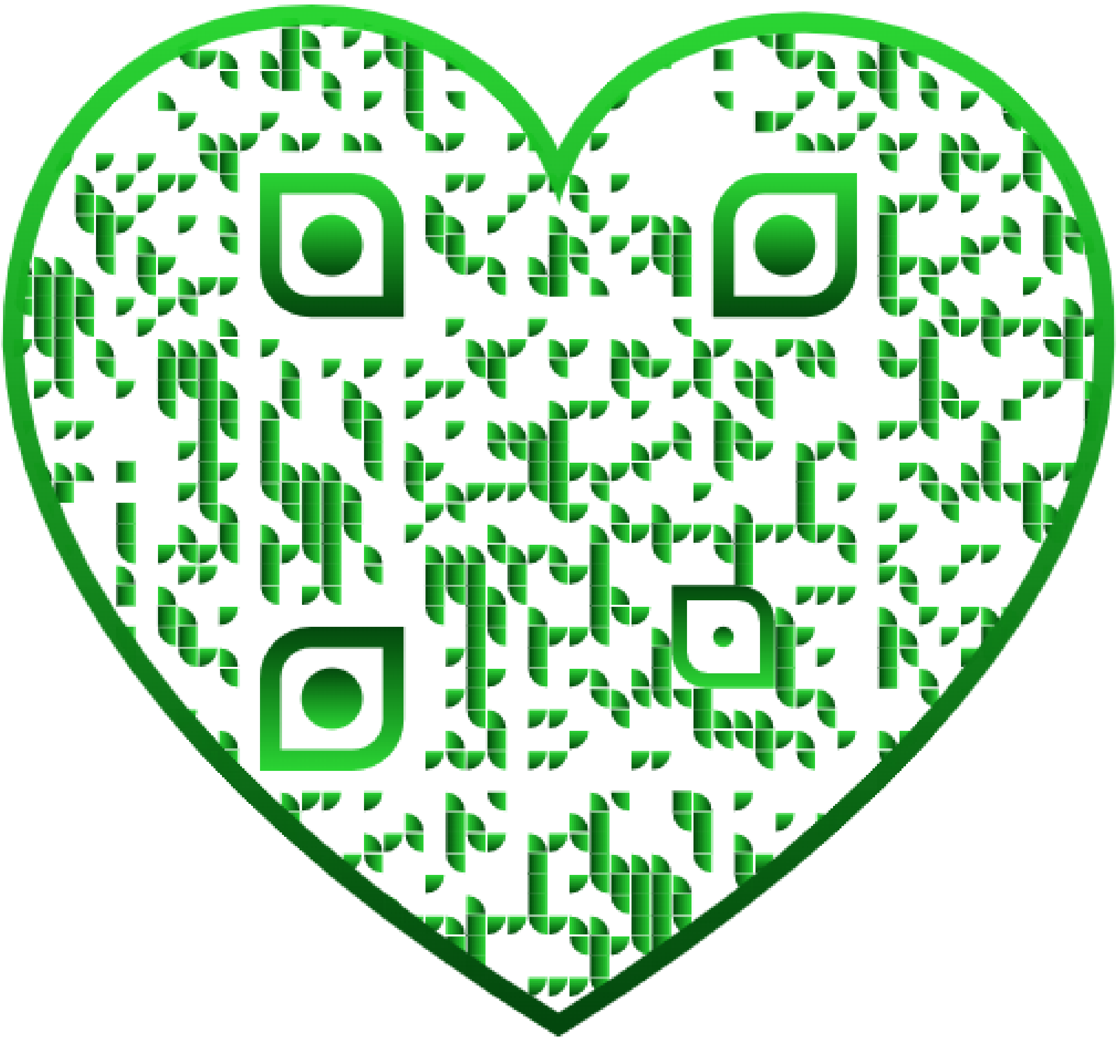
EXCLUSIVE: **REDBOOK TRADE-IN VALUES**



2026 Toyota RAV4

THE AUSTRALIAN SUV, 4WD AND UTE BUYER'S GUIDE

Aussies love to think big — and tall — especially with cars.

Sixty per cent of the new vehicles we buy are now SUVs. And one in five new vehicles is a ute, with dual-cab four-wheel drive models the favoured choice.

An influx of new brands means there's more choice than ever, including familiar favourites from the likes of Toyota, Mazda and Ford as well as relative newcomers such as GWM, Chery and BYD.

Intensifying competition means the ability to crunch a deal is well and truly back, making it something of a buyer's market.

There are also more electrified options, both in the form of pure EVs, hybrids and increasingly popular plug-in hybrids.

We've tried to cover them all and scrutinised each as though it was our hard-earned being spent.

There's also some we haven't been able to get to because they're not on the road yet. One of the most significant is the all-new Toyota RAV4 (pictured above and right) that arrives in the first half of 2026.

There's also plenty brewing in the ute market, from the Kia Tasman to newcomers such as the MG U9 and LDV Terron9.

And there are some wild cards heading our way, many from China. The electrified Deepal E07 (pictured right) is one of those, blending an SUV body with some ute thinking.

We hope you enjoy the read and have a pain-free and successful hunt for a new set of wheels.

Feel free to get in touch at **advice@evcentral.com.au**

2026 Toyota RAV4

Deepal E07

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SYMBOLS

In our tests on the following pages we have used symbols to give you a quick indication of the strengths of each vehicle and star ratings to indicate in more detail how each stacks up in its class. Here's what the symbols and stars mean:

Our piggybank indicates a vehicle that we think represents good value for money against the others in its class. It may not necessarily be the cheapest, but taking into account factors such as standard equipment, safety, the way it drives, resale values and quality, it shapes up as a good deal.

S A capital S indicates a vehicle that scores five stars out of five for occupant protection in ANCAP crash tests, which were updated at the end of 2023. As a result, some older cars have lost their five star rating. Go to *ancap.com.au.* for more information

If you're after a safe, practical vehicle to carry the kids, look for this symbol. We've limited its use to vehicles that have an ANCAP score of five stars out of five. We've also taken into account the placement of child-restraint anchor points, a versatile, spacious load area, back seat connectivity, ventilation and plenty of storage.

This is an internationally recognised symbol for environmentally friendly products and we've used it to indicate cars that are either low or zero emissions vehicles. That means hybrids and EVs in most cases. The fuel consumption and CO_2 emissions figures we list for each vehicle are from the Federal Government's *Green Vehicle Guide (greenvehicleguide.gov.au)* and are derived from the Australian Standard ADR81/02 test, long overdue for replacement by a new European test called the WLTP. In some cases, we have used WLTP figures because they give you a more accurate estimate of real world consumption. In EV tests, the maximum claimed range is given, and variations during testing are noted.

This symbol indicates a 4WD equipped with the necessary hardware to go off-road. The basic feature it has to have to qualify for this symbol is a dual-range transfer case.

A trophy indicates a vehicle that, all things considered, is at or near the top of its class. It's important to note that we don't test vehicles against some perfect theoretical model. Features that are important in big 4WDs, for example fuel range, are less important in, say, the compact SUV class, where buyers are looking for car-like dynamics.

STARS ★★★⯪☆

★ The star rating for safety is from Australian ANCAP or European NCAP crash tests. Note that some older cars have recently lost their five star ratings following tougher testing protocols in 2023.

★ Other star ratings, including the overall star rating, reflect how the vehicle rates against others in its class.

★ A four star vehicle is one of the class leaders. Three is average. Less than three indicates that you can find much better value elsewhere in the class.

PRICES

- Prices are supplied by manufacturers and unless stated do not include on-road charges, which vary from state to state. Note that advertised prices must now include all on-road costs.
- The best way to get a good deal on a new car is to do your research, test drive each of your shortlisted cars, then decide exactly the make, model, specification, colour and any options you require. Then you simply get a price from a few dealers on that car. If you have a trade in, you want what is called a changeover price.
- **Manufacturers change prices regularly and in some cases this will have occurred after our publication deadline.**

Check current prices and deals at *carsales.com.au.* Redbook future values in each test are average wholesale prices after three years/60,000km and five years/ 100,000km for a vehicle in average condition. Go to *redbook.com.au* for a valuation on your 4WD or SUV.

AUSTRALIAN SUV4WD&UTE BUYER'S GUIDE

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FORD RANGER SUPER DUTY

Anyone who knows their Ford trucks knows that Super Duty is a special nameplate that until now reserved for use on the mighty F-Series.

But the Super Duty name will be applied to the Ranger in 2026, adding more serious off-road nous, added load capability and a higher tow capacity.

Key to the changes are a reengineered chassis, beefed-up mechanicals, higher riding suspension and wheels placed further apart to maintain stability.

The result is not only a tough looking ute but also one that's been engineered to tow 4.5 tonnes and has an eight-tonne gross combination mass, meaning it will have a substantial payload.

The Super Duty will be offered as a single-cab, super-cab and double-cab body styles, each powered by the Ranger's 3.0-litre V6 turbo diesel.

There's a 130-litre fuel tank, bigger differentials and 18-inch General Grabber all-terrain tyres in a light truck construction.

There's also some clever tech, including the Smart Hitch and Onboard Scales. It uses advanced sensors in each suspension system measuring how far it droops when laden, allowing the onboard computer to calculate if the vehicle is overloaded.

It's all about designing a tough truck designed to work. Indeed it was forestry workers, mining companies and farmers that helped shape the Super Duty.

But families and grey nomads hitching a trailer will no doubt also appreciate the engineering nous that's gone into the newcomer to the Ford line-up. Expect to see the Super Duty in showrooms in 2026. ▪

SUBARU FORESTER

The all-new Subaru Forester just missed the cut for this issue of our mag.

But we've got all the details of the latest iteration of the popular mid-sized SUV.

Subaru hasn't mucked with a successful formula, pairing a simple but effective all-wheel drive system with a high-riding wagon body and decent off-road ability.

Priced from $43,490 there are seven variants to choose from, three of which are powered by a new hybrid system that teams a 2.5-litre four-cylinder engine with a 90kW electric motor to deliver a combined 145kW. The hybrid costs about $5000 more than the regular petrol variants.

Claimed average fuel use is 6.2L/100km, which is less than the petrol variants (7.9L/100km). However, it's not as dramatic a difference in fuel use as some may expect from a hybrid.

Entry-level models get an 11.6-inch central screen, 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster, cloth seats, 360-degree camera and wireless phone charging.

The Premium ($46,490) adds powered front seats, sat-nav and a powered tailgate while the Sport (from $48,490) also includes a sunroof, trim upgrades and Subaru's X-Mode all-wheel drive settings.

Rounding out the range is the Touring ($50,990 as a petrol-only or $55,990 as a hybrid) with leather, ventilated front seats and Harman Kardon audio. ■

REDBOOK VALUATIONS

In the *Australian SUV, 4WD & Ute Buyer's Guide*, we include trade-in values for every model in our Showroom section. These are provided to us by *Redbook*, Australia's leading authority on used-car, 4WD and SUV values.

Each model we test includes three- and five-year retained values, expressed as a percentage. These are based on what the wholesale price — i.e. the price a dealer would pay for the car — would be for a car in average condition with average kilometres for its age.

You'll find Redbook's three- and five-year retained values in the Spex for single-page tests and at the end of the What's Standard section in tests that run over two pages.

When you're selling your car privately, trading it in or buying a car, a Redbook valuation is money well spent.

When selling your car privately, a Redbook personalised valuation will help you get a clearer understanding of what your car is worth in today's market. It can also be particularly handy during negotiations with potential buyers, with your list price backed up by an independent vehicle pricing authority and tailored to your vehicle's kilometres and condition.

When trading in your vehicle, a Redbook personalised valuation can help make the choice between selling privately and trading in simpler, with up-to-date market values for each sale price option displayed on your certificate.

Whether you're buying used or new, a Redbook valuation can put you in a stronger negotiating position through understanding the market value of the car you're after at the time and even in the future. Not only will you have peace of mind when it comes to paying the right price for your new car, you'll also ensure you understand the potential future resale price.

A Redbook valuation certificate costs $39.00 for one car.

Go to **redbook.com.au** for more information. ■

THE SHOWROOM

New models and updates in this issue include the Audi Q6, BMW X3, BYD Shark 6, Cadillac Lyriq, GMC Yukon, Hyundai Santa Fe, JAC T9, Jaecoo J7, Kia, EV3, Kia Tasman, Mazda CX-80, Polestar 4, Tesla Model Y, Toyota Prado (pictured) and Volvo EX90.

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ALFA ROMEO **TONALE** FROM **$50,900**

Alfa Romeo's compact Tonale Hybrid SUV is available in three variants.

Tonale Ti and Veloce, priced at $50,900 and $58,900 respectively, are powered by a 1.5-litre four cylinder turbopetrol engine, matched with a seven-speed dual clutch automatic and 48 volt mild hybrid electrification.

Tonale Veloce Plug-In Hybrid, at $78,500, adds a 15.5kWh battery that gives it a claimed EV range of up to 60km. The plug-in drivetrain also features a 1.3-litre four cylinder turbopetrol engine/six-speed automatic that drives the front wheels and a 90kW/250Nm electric motor-driven rear axle. Combined output is 208kW.

Mild hybrid electrification is not true hybrid technology, at least in the sense that the electric components in the drivetrain contribute in any meaningful way. Rather, its main purpose is to improve fuel efficiency in city driving by using extra battery power to keep the vehicle's electrical systems functioning when the engine is automatically switched off as the car comes to a stop in traffic, then to get the car started again when you're ready to move off and to give the petrol engine a high voltage torque boost, via the electric motor, when you put your foot down.

Alfa claims that its 15kW electric motor/0.8kWh battery also allows a semblance of EV operation, at speeds below 15km/h, but on test this was only ever momentary.

Alfa's claim of 5.6L/100km fuel consumption wasn't achievable either, though Tonale's real world average of 7.0L/100km is good.

It's far from a refined drivetrain, though. There's hesitation and sluggishness at low speeds and the dual clutch transmission can dither too, with a characteristic delay in engaging from rest. Three driving modes — economy, normal and dynamic — each delivers markedly improved responsiveness and performance, especially across the midrange where the electric contribution does make a difference.

That said, 118kW and 240Nm are humble numbers, so Tonale is a dull drive for something with an Alfa Romeo badge — unlike its bigger brother the Stelvio, which is one of the most enjoyable and capable SUVs on the road.

Handling is typical front wheel drive SUV — safe and secure, but distinctly unsporty. The ride, on big (optional) 20-inch wheels with low profile tyres, is too firm, especially around town, and the Bridgestone Turanzas also generate a lot of noise at freeway speeds. Steering is Alfa precise, albeit overassisted.

In EV mode the PHEV is zippy, but far from what some may expect from a sporty Italian. The 250Nm of torque ensures respectable pull, but there's also 1.8 tonnes of SUV to muscle around. Push harder on the accelerator and things get more lively, with a mostly seamless transition between the two powertrains.

It's a happier story in the cabin, where the Tonale looks and feels like a real Alfa, with styling cues that include digital instruments housed in an olde worlde double barrel binnacle, the most beautiful steering wheel in the business and superb front seats that are firm, supportive. Fake rather than real Italian leather upholstery is a bit sad, though.

It's tightish in the back if front seat occupants are tall, but access is fine and the elevated, flat bench seat is comfortable. Boot space is reasonable and the tailgate is power operated.

Safety tech includes adaptive matrix LED headlights with automatic beam switching, 360 degrees camera coverage and semi-autonomous low speed traffic crawling.

Alfa's Tonale is an underwhelming drive that's looking expensive against regular hybrid options such as the Hyundai Kona, Kia Niro hybrid, VW T-Roc, Toyota Corolla Cross hybrid, Honda HR-V/ZR-V hybrids. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★⯪☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯪☆☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Looks beautiful inside and out
- ✔ Comfortable, supportive driver's seat
- ✔ Loaded with safety tech
- ✔ Midrange electric torque boost
- ✔ Easy on fuel

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Overpriced
- ✘ Alfa resale values also tend to be weak
- ✘ The unsporty Alfa
- ✘ Mediocre dynamics and a hard ride
- ✘ Fake leather upholstery! In an Italian car!
- ✘ Infotainment screen is very cluttered

SPEX

- Made in Italy
- 1.5-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/mild hybrid/seven-speed dual clutch/front wheel drive
- 118kW of power at 5750rpm/240Nm of torque at 1500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 8.8 seconds (claimed)
- 5.5L/100km highway; 5.7L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 129g/km; fuel tank is 55 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, blind spot monitoring, 360 degree cameras, rear cross traffic alert and braking, 10.25 inch touchscreen, wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, wireless phone charging, digital radio, fake leather upholstery, heated and cooled front seats, dual zone air, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 63%

compare with ...

BMW X1/X2, Audi Q2/Q3, VW T-Roc, Lexus UX, Mini Countryman, Volvo XC40

AUDI **Q3** FROM **$57,500**

The third generation Audi Q3 might be labelled an SUV but as with many of its peers it could easily be described as a high-riding hatchback.

It delivers the usual SUV attributes: taller driving position, better vision around the car, and a higher "hip point", making it easier to get in and out.

All this in a package that fits in the same size parking space as a Toyota Corolla. Little wonder compact SUVs are so popular.

Prices start from $57,500 plus on-road costs for the 35 TFSi, powered by a carryover 1.4-litre turbo four-cylinder petrol engine (110kW/250Nm) matched to a six-speed S-tronic twin clutch auto driving the front wheels.

The coupe-style S Line Sportback, with the same drivetrain, starts at $61,000.

The 40TFSi, with a 132kW 2.0-litre turbopetrol/seven-speed S-tronic/quattro all-wheel drivetrain, is $64,700, or $68,400 in S Line specification. S Line Sportback is $70,800.

The hotrod RS Q3 that tops the range runs a 2.5-litre five cylinder turbo, with a whopping 294kW of power and 480Nm of torque. RS Q3 hatch is $102,300 and the Sportback is $105,300.

While it may look familiar, this Q3 has grown in every dimension compared to its predecessor and every body panel is new, distinguished by sharp creases inside and out.

The cabin has as standard Audi's digital 10-inch widescreen dash display instead of analogue instruments. The generously-sized 10-inch central infotainment touchscreen is also standard, and you can option the Virtual Cockpit configurable instrument display as well.

Apple CarPlay/Android Auto connectivity, navigation, voice control and digital radio are standard.

Safety tech includes autonomous emergency braking, blind spot monitoring and 360 degree cameras.

As with most Audis, the interior is extremely practical with large door pockets front and rear and a decent size glovebox, although the centre console is small.

Charging points in the front cabin include a standard USB and one USB-C port while back seat passengers have a choice of two USB-C ports and one 12V socket. Wireless phone charging is also standard.

The Q3 is one of the roomiest vehicles in its segment, both in terms of back seat space (where there is ample foot room under the front seats) and the cargo hold, which offers a class leading 530 litres of space.

On the road Q3 is relatively quiet and refined.

The steering can feel a bit too light at first but you soon get accustomed to it.

This also makes it easier to manoeuvre the Q3 at low speeds and when parking.

The suspension feels taut over bumps — not too busy and not too floaty — and the steering is impressively responsive. The 1.4-litre turbo engine feels surprisingly sprightly, but it's a bit thirsty by current standards and requires premium.

The six-speed twin-clutch auto is generally a smooth operator but does have the trademark delay on take-off typical of this type of transmission, and it's an expensive device to service, too.

Overall, the Q3 is an impressive effort — if you're prepared to pay big money, especially once a few option packs are ticked.

You should also have a look at the Skoda Karoq, VW T-Roc and Tiguan.

The latter is priced from around $43,990. In many respects, including drivetrain, it's basically the same car, but don't expect an Audi dealer to tell you that. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★ Euro NCAP
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Roomy, practical cabin and cargo hold
- ✔ Sharp design inside and out.
- ✔ Optional widescreen displays
- ✔ Refined, flexible performance
- ✔ Agile, secure handling

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Pricey, and there are a lot of options that should be standard
- ✘ Base model costs about $10,000 more than the VW Tiguan, which is basically the same car

SPEX (35 TFSi)

- Made in Hungary
- 1.4-litre turbopetrol/six-speed S Tronic/front wheel drive
- 110kW of power from 5000-6000rpm/250Nm of torque from 1500-3500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 9.3 seconds (claimed)
- 6.0L/100km highway; 9.4L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 164g/km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, front and rear autonomous emergency braking, lane keeping assistance, blind zone warning, rear cross-traffic alert, speed sign recognition, 360-degree camera, tyre pressure monitoring, navigation, voice control, wireless phone charging, 18-inch alloy wheels
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 69%; 5yr: 54%

compare with ...

BMW X1/X2, Mercedes-Benz GLA, Lexus UX, Skoda Karoq, Volvo XC40, VW T-Roc

AUDI **Q4 E-TRON** FROM **$84,900**

Audi's Q4 e-tron is an all-electric compact SUV aiming to capitalise on strong EV demand at the more affordable end of the market.

OK, with prices starting at $84,900 it's not exactly a bargain, but it lands it in the space dominated by the BMW iX1 and iX2, each attracting their fair share of buyers.

For that you get a more traditional SUV body but there's also a sleeker Sportback ($86,500), the latter missing out on roof rails but getting an S-Line styling pack with 20-inch alloys.

Each is powered by a 210kW/545Nm motor driving the rear wheels for up to 540km of EV range (524km for the SUV body).

Standard fare includes 19-inch alloy wheels, partial leather trim, powered tailgate, heated front seats, powered driver's seat, tri-zone ventilation, adaptive cruise, front and rear parking sensors, ambient lighting, a 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster and an 11.6-inch infotainment screen with wireless Apple CarPlay/Android Auto.

There's also auto braking, rear cross traffic assist, exit warning, blind spot warning and lane departure warning.

Step up to the e-tron 55 Quattro and you're paying a lot more: $105,900 as an SUV or $107,500 for the Sportback. You get an extra motor for all-wheel drive and power jumps to 250kW, plus the front motor can chime in with up to 134Nm. It'll zip to 100km/h 1.3 seconds sooner, in 5.4 seconds.

There's also 20-inch wheels, 360-degree camera, matrix LED headlights, various trim upgrades (including alloy pedals), powered passenger seat and memory settings for the driver's seating position.

The 55 SUV and Sportback score the S line kit with 20-inch alloys (21-inch Sportback), Matrix LED headlights and LED tail lights. Inside are electric sport seats (memory for driver), flat top and bottom steering wheel, Audi's fancier virtual cockpit plus, a 360-degree camera, park assist and active lane assist.

While the Q4's exterior dimensions slot between a Q3 and Q5, its dedicated EV architecture does a good job maximizing interior space. A nearly flat floor in the back teams with respectable legroom to make it an adult-friendly space.

The 40/20/40 split-folding back seat is indicative of the thoughtfulness throughout. So too is the open centre console with its handy storage and the central screen tilted towards the driver.

It's all beautifully presented, too, with the same attention to detail and quality materials of any other Audi.

Touch pads on the steering wheel are maybe trying a tad hard, but the functionality is ultimately there. And having proper controls for the ventilation system is a win for quickly adjusting things.

We drove the single motor 45 Sportback, which delivers more than enough thrust. It's a zippy machine that is not only fun around town but also cruises effortlessly at 100km/h.

And the 82kWh battery ensures plenty of fun between charges. Expect upwards of 450km comfortably.

The Q4 is also slick through bends, its agile manners translating to a car that's fun and engaging. Beautifully weighted steering adds to the feeling of confidence.

It's competent, too, rising to the occasion of a snaking road but always remaining nicely planted on the road.

All of which adds up to a tempting EV alternative that packs plenty in.

Sure, it's not as cheap as a petrol alternative, but the Q4 delivers on driving enjoyment and luxury gear. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★⯨

Performance
★★★★☆

Handling
★★★★☆

Quality and reliability
★★★★⯨

Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆

Value for money
★★★⯨☆

Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Slick styling and classy interior
✔ Punchy acceleration
✔ Long driving range
✔ Classy finishes inside

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Luxury price tag
✘ Big price jump to the dual motor Quattro
✘ Q5-like interior space

SPEX (45 Sportback)

- Made in Germany
- Single electric motor/single-speed transmission/rear-wheel drive
- 210kW of power/545Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 6.7 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 540km
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, exit warning, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, leather, power tailgate, ambient lighting, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 42%

compare with ...

BMW iX1/iX2, Mercedes-Benz EQA, Tesla Model Y, Lexus UX300e

AUDI **Q6 E-TRON** FROM **$99,900**

Audi was one of the first premium car makers to really take the electric vehicle revolution seriously, launching its range of E-Tron vehicles globally and pouring serious investment and engineering nous into making them attractive to early adopters.

While the early versions seemed, and looked, like radical departures from mainstream Audi offerings, the new Audi Q6 E-Tron is something different, because it feels like a fully formed premium German vehicle that just happens to have fully electric underpinnings.

Indeed, it looks and feels a lot like the mid-sized Audi Q5 SUV (a new range has just been launched, powered by combustion engines, with plug-in hybrid variants to follow), which it notionally competes with, despite being more expensive.

The new Q6 is the first Audi built on the new PPE — or Premium Platform Electric — which it shares with the excellent Porsche Macan. This means it's not, in any way, an electric powertrain being shoved into a car that was initially designed to be a combustion vehicle. The Q6 E-Tron is an EV from the ground up.

It also represents the pinnacle of what Audi can do with this technology, and the benefits of its previous efforts.

On a DC fast charger, Audi says this new Q6 can go from 10 to 80 per cent charge in 21 minutes, and that you can add 255km of range in just 10 minutes.

The issue that Audi continues to have with selling EVs, in an increasingly crowded market, is price. The cheapest Q6 you can buy starts at $99,900, which gets you a non-quattro, rear-wheel-drive only variant with 462km of range. A $115,500 Performance model ups that to 558km of range. From there you step up to $122,500 for the Q6 Quattro, which cuts your range to 542km.

Surprisingly, taking the next price hop up to the range-topping SQ6 E-Tron, at $151,400, gets you the most range of all — 568km — thanks to its clever air suspension, which can drop the vehicle to a more aerodynamically beneficial ride height in Efficiency or Dynamic modes (it can also raise the car by as much as 75mm should you be testing out its Off Road mode).

The air suspension also makes the SQ6 more enjoyable, and comfortable, to drive in every way and this is the best variant, if you're willing to spend the extra. It's also properly rapid, of course, thanks to its twin motors. But that's not to say the entry-level versions are awful. Indeed, the new Q6 E-Tron Performance base model feels properly resolved and like a proper Audi that rides and handles well, and is even a lot of fun to hurl through a few bends. The fact that its rear-wheel drive only and has just one motor rather than two might actually make it more attractive to some people who find the speedy shove of electric vehicles intimidating. The base model is quick, but not painfully so.

The new Q6 also features a fantastic and sexily modern new cabin, offering wall-to-wall OLED screens (even the passenger gets one, on which they can watch YouTube without distracting the driver, who can't eyeball it thanks to clever privacy technology) as well as a clever new head-up display on which you can play a selection of video games (while you're parked, of course), operated using the shift paddles and the brake and accelerator.

Truly, this latest E Tron feels like the culmination of something for Audi, or perhaps the EV they wish they'd been able to make from day one. Yes, it's expensive, and it makes the petrol and diesel-powered Audi Q5 look like great value, but if you're after a premium SUV that's an EV, the Q6 E-Tron is definitely worth a test drive. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★★
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ New PPE platform brings better chassis dynamics
- ✔ Spectacular new interior
- ✔ Choice of single motor or dual motor options
- ✔ Ride and handling
- ✔ Surprising off-road ability

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's expensive
- ✘ Screens might be over the top for some
- ✘ Warranty could be longer

SPEX (Q6 E-Tron Performance)

- Price $115,500
- Built in: Germany
- One permanent magnet synchronous motor on the rear axle, 100kWh battery
- 280kW and 580Nm
- 19.9kWh per 100km, range 542km
- Warranty five-years/unlimited kilometres
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 50%; 5yr: 35%

compare with ...

Porsche Macan, Polestar 3, Mercedes-Benz EQE SUV, BMW iX

AUDI **Q7** FROM **$117,284**

Audi's second-generation Q7, launched in 2019, is a huge improvement over the first. That model's whale-like scale made it a daunting vehicle to drive in the city and its high weight meant it had the handling agility of a humpback.

Audi's engineers found ways to shed around 300kg without affecting strength or compromising occupant safety.

The Q7 is now among the more pleasant and capable large premium SUVs to drive, and a late 2023 update, due here in the second half of 2024, brings styling /interior decor tweaks, new customisable exterior lighting, plus infotainment and safety tech upgrades

The Audi copes gracefully with corners, ride comfort is very good (with optional adjustable air suspension) and noise, vibration and harshness levels are very low.

The Q7 doesn't pretend to be a sportster and this is to its credit.

The range opens with the 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel 45TDi, with 170kW/500Nm, priced at $117,284.

The 201kW/600Nm 50TDi S-Line is $136,815 and the 250kW/500Nm 3.0-litre turbo 55TFSi also $136,815.

The 373kW/770Nm twin-turbopetrol 4.0-litre V8 SQ7 TFSi is $174,485.

It reaches 100km/h from rest in just 4.1 seconds. Astounding.

Audi's mild hybrid drivetrains comply with the Euro 6 emissions standard. This means the Q7 has a 12L tank for AdBlue fluid, a urea solution.

The 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel is smooth, muscular and quiet, a perfect blend of everyday attributes for a big SUV.

Rapid acceleration and remarkably low consumption are similarly impressive and the entire mild hybrid drivetrain is classy, refined engineering.

The Q7 now faces competition from BMW's X7, Mercedes' GLE, which now offers a seven seat layout, Lexus LX, Jeep Grand Cherokee, Land Rover Discovery and Volvo XC90, so if you've got a tribe to carry you now have much more choice than previously.

Q7's centre row is split 35:30:35, with each section adjustable fore and aft, while the outboard sections have a fold-and-flip feature for easy row three access.

Rear air con is standard. Split 50:50, the reasonably roomy third-row seat is electrically operated, as is the tailgate. All rear seats have Isofix child restraint anchors.

The dash is elegant and logical, with Audi's all digital "virtual cockpit" standard, and the heated front seats are supportive and comfortable.

A 360-degree helicopter camera-view display on the centre screen, Audi's latest self-parking system (which can be controlled from your smartphone) and Matrix LED/laser headlights are just some of the highlights of the Q7.

The Q7 is getting on a bit, but you're shopping the seven-seater luxury SUV class and want diesel power, it remains a good thing.

However if you're focussed on value, Hyundai's excellent 2.2-litre turbodiesel Palisade, priced from $70,800, is certainly worth a test drive too. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★ ANCAP
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Seven seats standard
✔ Interior quality and versatility
✔ Strong, refined, frugal drivetrain
✔ New-found agility and poise

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ It's still a huge thing to manoeuvre
✘ Resale values aren't great
✘ Painful options prices
✘ Potential reliability issues

SPEX (50TDi)

- Made in Slovakia
- 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel mild hybrid/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 210kW of power from 3500–4000rpm/600Nm of torque from 2250–3250rpm
- 0–100km/h in 6.5 seconds (claimed)
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Max towing weight 3500kg
- 6.5L/100km highway; 7.2L/100km city; CO_2 emissions are 180g/km. Fuel tank 85 litres.
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, 20-inch alloy wheels, tyre pressure indicator, 360-degree top-view camera, automatic parking, adaptive cruise, cross traffic alert, leather, power tailgate, three-zone air, drive select, digital radio, navigation.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 68%; 5yr: 53%

compare with ...

BMW X5, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Lexus RX, Volvo XC90

AUDI Q8 55 E-TRON FROM $154,600

The Audi Q8 55 e-tron marks the major mid-life update to the luxury SUV formally known simply as the e-tron.

Priced from $154,600 for the taller wagon-style body shape or $166,600 as a sleeker Sportback — each badged as a 55 model — the dual electric motor Q8 e-tron bears no relation to the similarly-sized Q8 that's powered by petrol.

Down the track there will also be an SQ8 e-tron that utilises a triple electric motor set-up — one at the front and two at the rear — as the performance hero of the range.

The five-seater Audi comes with 20-inch wheels, head-up display, 360-degree camera, ambient lighting and heated and electrically adjustable front seats, faced in leather, with memory settings for the driver's seat.

The dash is a digital wonderland, with a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster, 10.1-inch central infotainment screen and 8.6-inch lower screen dedicated to ventilation controls.

Sportback misses out on roof rails but adds 21-inch wheels, sports front seats and separate ventilation controls for each rear seat.

Safety is comprehensive, as expected from Audi. Five radar sensors, five cameras and 12 ultrasonic sensors monitor what's going on around you.

The Q8 also includes six years/90,000km of servicing and a six-year subscription to the Chargefox public recharging network. The latter sounds good in theory, but in practice most owners will likely charge at home. Our experience with Chargefox chargers also suggests they can be unreliable, reducing their usefulness in the wild.

At 114kWh, the Audi's battery is one of the largest in any EV sold in Australia.

The e-tron can be charged at home using a port on either side of the car behind the front wheels. For faster DC public charging you can only use the port on the driver's side.

The e-tron takes 31 minutes to charge from 10 to 80 per cent at a fast public DC charger, with a wallbox charge taking about 17 hours or as little as five hours if you splash out $6900 for the 22kW onboard charger that can use the maximum available from three-phase home chargers.

However, despite the large battery capacity the claimed range of the Q8 is just 454km. Good, but not outstanding, with the modest distance indicative of relatively heavy electricity use of 25.6kWh per 100km.

It's a similar story with performance from the dual-motor set-up.

There's a combined 300kW and 664Nm, which is thoroughly acceptable and makes for brisk acceleration — 0-100km/h in 5.6 seconds — but it's not as enthusiastic as some EV rivals, notably Kia's EV6 GT and Tesla's Model Y Performance.

In regular Drive mode there's a bit less pull, with the full 300kW not on tap until you select Sport.

Even then, if the battery capacity gets too low it limits access to that higher boost output, taking the edge off thrust.

On the road, the Q8 is plush and comfortable, the adaptive air suspension nicely smothering bumps.

It's particularly good in Comfort mode, but even in Sport there's enough compliance for everyday driving duties.

Elsewhere the Q8 is acceptable without standing out in the fast-moving EV sphere.

There's decent space up front and a familiar Audi layout that looks elegant but doesn't push any boundaries.

Those in the rear are also well catered for, although with seating for five it limits the usefulness for large families.

Which to some extent sums up the Q8. It's competent and accomplished but doesn't push any boundaries. It's more an interesting, engaging (and very expensive) electric option for Audi fans rather than an SUV that sets any new benchmarks. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety	★★★★★
Performance	★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability	★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★⯪☆☆
Overall	★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Comfortable ride
✔ Formidable driver assistance safety tech
✔ Competent, surefooted dynamics
✔ Tractable performance
✔ Charge port on both sides
✔ Included servicing

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Relatively high electricity use
✘ Pricey compared with faster, more efficient rivals
✘ The subscription Chargefox chargers can be unreliable
✘ Performance is relatively sedate

SPEX (wagon)

- Made in Belgium
- Dual electric motors/single speed transmission/114kWh battery/all-wheel drive
- 300kW of power/664Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h: 5.6 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum range 454km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, 360 degree cameras, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, rear cross traffic and intersection assist, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, navigation, wireless phone charging, leather upholstery, dual zone air, heated and ventilated front seats, 20-inch alloys, space saver spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 53%; 5yr: 34%

compare with ...

BMW iX, Mercedes-Benz EQE SUV, Porsche Macan

BMW **X1/IX1** FROM **$61,800**

The BMW iX1 is an electric SUV that utilises the body and interior layout of the petrol-powered X1 compact five-seater.

The X1 starts at $61,800 for the sDrive 18i and rises to $92,300 for the sporty M35i model. The EV iX1 is priced from $80,600 for the base front-wheel drive eDrive20 xLine.

Splash out another $6200 and you get the xDrive30 xLine that adds another electric motor for all-wheel drive. An M Sport version is the same price.

Fake leather, electric seats, dual-zone air, smart key entry, powered tailgate and a wireless phone charger are standard.

An option pack includes a panoramic sunroof, massaging front seats and 12-speaker Harman Kardon audio.

The X1's cabin is beautifully presented to live up to the premium pricing. Metal highlights nicely contrast the dark hues while ambient lighting adds to the quality display.

The iX1 gets a curved instrument cluster that flows into the central touchscreen.

Gone is BMW's iDrive control system, with the iX1 instead requiring touch commands for the infotainment screen.

It pays to familiarise yourself with the dozens of embedded apps that cover everything from charging and ventilation to lighting and seating.

You also need to delve into that screen for the air-conditioning settings, which adds another step from physical buttons.

There's also myriad choices for the layout of the instrument cluster and head-up display.

In the rear there's surprisingly good head room for what is a compact SUV, however legroom is marginal if those up front get greedy stretching out.

A 40/20/40 split-folding back seat makes it easy to stash bulky items and a deep underfloor binnacle houses charging cables and valuables.

At 540 litres the boot is useful, although the iX1 gets less space at 490L.

The front seats also hug beautifully with cosseting wings around your shoulders. Throw in a chunky steering wheel and relatively low-slung driving position by SUV standards and it makes for a sporty cockpit.

The X1 lacks the driving pizzazz of a traditional rear-wheel drive BMW such as the 3-Series sedan, instead trading some driver involvement for light and easy around-town running, plus the greater space efficient and and the lower cost of producing front-wheel drivetrains. Riding on optional larger wheels exacerbates the sharp edges on bumps but it's otherwise well controlled and athletic.

Press the start button of the iX1 and there's a futuristic sound that was crafted by Oscar winner Hans Zimmer. You can keep the soundtrack coming with Iconic Sounds in the drive settings.

Various modes change not only the drive settings — steering, regenerative braking, throttle sensitivity and more — but also ambient lighting and backgrounds for the dual screens.

The iX1 delivers an engaging driving experience, and the iX1 has some hot hatch tendencies in the way it points into a corner and hangs on.

It's a fun SUV to punt around, albeit with some firmness that takes the edge off ride comfort.

With 230kW and 494Nm in the xDrive30 there's no shortage of thrust.

Claimed range for the xDrive30 is 439km and it sprints to 100km/h in a claimed 5.6 seconds.

The eDrive20's 150kW/247Nm delivers a lot less and channels it through the front wheels, so don't expect anything nearly as exciting to drive. However it will take you up to 475km, and reaches 100km/h in 8.6 seconds.

The iX1 compact SUV is a BMW through and through, loaded with tech, highly capable, luxurious and enjoyable to drive. In some ways it shades the petrol-fed X1. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Slick, high quality cabin presentation in line with other BMWs
- ✔ It's BMW's most affordable electric vehicle and may be eligible for government incentives
- ✔ Sharp and engaging to drive
- ✔ Ample performance from dual-motor version

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Sizeable price premium over the petrol-fed X1
- ✘ Ventilation settings need to be adjusted within the main screen
- ✘ Ride tends towards firm
- ✘ No paddles to adjust regen or drive modes
- ✘ There's a lot going on in that central touchscreen
- ✘ No spare, just a repair kit
- ✘ Weak resale values

SPEX (iX1 eDrive20)

- Single electric motor/64.7kWh battery/single speed automatic/front-wheel drive
- 150kW of power/247Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 8.6 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 475km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, head up display, 360 degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 56%; 5yr: 39%
- Made in Germany

compare with ...

Audi Q3, Mercedes-Benz GLA, Volvo XC40, Lexus UX, Jaguar E-Pace

BMW **X3** FROM **$86,100**

BMW's X3 is like a cross between Goldilocks and an iPhone. Much like Apple's prodigious product, the X3 — a mid-sized, premium SUV — it has been a spectacular and ubiquitous sales success, shifting more than 3.5 million units worldwide since its launch 20 years ago, with almost 60,000 of those sold in Australia.

And like a Goldilocks bed or bowl of porridge, it's the just-right-sized-ness of the BMW X3 that makes it so popular with such a wide array of buyers, and families. It's not too big to be intimidating to drive or difficult to park, but it's not too small for actual humans to drive long distances in the back seat, with all their gear in the boot behind them.

Being merely large rather than huge also helps in the looks department, and the all-new version of the venerable X3, now in its fourth generation, looks sharper, more architectural (or "monolithic", as BMW describes it) and more modern inside and out.

It's a real head turner, with a new "Iconic Glow" grille that separates the two famous BMW kidneys for the first time, and a panoramic glass roof that really adds to a sense of space and lightness inside when it's open.

The interior introduces a new technology called "Shytech", which involves making things like air vents "less conspicuous" to create a slicker and sleeker environment, highlighted by lush screens (14.9-inch and 12.3-inch as standard). Between the front seats is a new illuminated "Jewellery Box" with cupholders, a "Jewellery stone" and a wireless charging tray.

The driver is also provided with a new and very sporty-feeling flat-bottomed steering wheel that connects them to what is a properly involving and distinctly German driving experience. Just how much you'll enjoy it depends on which variant you choose.

The range starts with the X3 20xDrive, which has had a price cut over the former model, from $88,100 to $86,100 for the new one, which, BMW points out, now features far more equipment, better performance and upgraded technology. It comes with a mild-hybrid set up and a 2.0-litre turbocharged four-cylinder engine making 140kW and 310Nm, which gets you to 100km/h in a slightly leisurely 8.5 seconds.

It does feel pointy to drive and the all-new chassis is excellent, but in terms of performance it does leave you wanting more, and you can get a lot more from the range-topping BMW X3 M50 xDrive, which costs $128,900 (vs $126,800 for the outgoing model) and features a fantastic in-line six-cylinder turbocharged engine, featuring mild-hybrid technology but sounding anything but mild.

This X3 is hugely sporty, shouty and fun to drive, with a 0 to 100km/h sprint of 4.6 seconds and a thrilling engine note that recalls glorious BMW sports cars of yore.

Surprisingly, though, the pick of the litter is the X3 30e xDrive, which is a PHEV that uses the 2.0-litre petrol engine combined with an electric motor and a 19.7kWh battery, which provides a pure electric range of 91km, and thus a theoretical fuel-economy figure just 1.6 litres per 100km. That offers impressive savings at the fuel pump, of course, but the new PHEV is also cheaper than the previous model, at $104,100 versus $111,800.

All three models use an eight-speed automatic transmission with sexy shift paddles behind the wheel, and in the PHEV it's worth using them to engage with just how much fun this car is to drive. All three variants also offer "Boost" mode; hold in the left paddle for a few seconds and you get a 10-second burst of maximum everything, ideal for overtaking.

What makes the PHEV the pick isn't just the value equation, or the economy, however, it's the fact that, while it's obviously not quicker than the M50 (it takes 6.2 seconds to hit 100km/h), it handles better, probably thanks to the relative lack of weight over the front wheels, and the lower centre of gravity provided by the battery. It has better turn-in and better ride quality in general.

If you're an enthusiast, of course, you might still want the fast and loud version, so make sure you take a proper test drive in both. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★⯪
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Fabulous new chassis
- ✔ Futuristic new interior
- ✔ Excellent six-cylinder and PHEV options
- ✔ Chunky BMW steering
- ✔ Two out of three models now cheaper
- ✔ Boost mode

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ New styling will not appeal to everyone
- ✘ HUD is large but can be distracting
- ✘ Warranty could be longer

SPEX (X3 20 xDrive)

- Made in the USA
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/eight-speed auto/all-wheel drive
- 140kW of power/310Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 8.5 seconds
- 9.1L/100km city, 6.6L/100km country, 95 octane premium, CO2 emissions are 171g/km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, semi-autonomous Driving Assistant Plus, head-up display, surround view camera, rear parking sensors, swivelling LED headlights, 19-inch alloy wheels, leather upholstery, sports front seats, 10-inch infotainment screen, navigation, Bluetooth, digital radio, wireless phone charging, automatic emergency services calling
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 67%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Alfa Stelvio, Audi Q5, Jaguar F Pace, Lexus NX, LR Disco Sport, Mercedes GLC, VW Tiguan, Volvo XC60

BMW **X5** FROM **$137,600**

The BMW X5 has been on sale since 1999, with its Australian range now opening with the xDrive 30d, running a 210kW/650Nm 3.0-litre straight six turbodiesel, priced at $137,600.

The xDrive 40i, with a 280kW/520Nm turbopetrol six, is $141,600, the 360kW/700Nm xDrive 50e plug-in hybrid is $152,600 and the M60i, with a 390kW/750Nm twin turbopetrol 4.4-litre V8 is $175,600.

The hotrod X5 M Competition, with the V8 chipped for 460kW, is $244,900.

This fourth-generation X5, the G05 launched in 2018, expanded in all directions, notably in width and wheelbase. It's still a five seater, with a third row option.

Serious effort went into upgrading infotainment and connectivity on the 2023 update.

The "BMW Curved Display" includes all digital instruments in a 12.3-inch screen, version 8.5 of the iDrive operating system in a 14.9-inch central screen, a built-in SIM card that accesses information and assistance services (and automatically downloads system updates), and smartphone integration via BMW's dedicated app.

You can lock and unlock the car simply by holding your smartphone close to the external door handles. When you place it in the phone tray, you can start the engine.

Although the X5's new all digital dash is beautifully stylish and crafted in high quality materials, it does take a long session — or maybe an intensive instruction course when you pick the car up from the dealer — to even begin to understand how to operate it. BMW's iDrive in particular has copped plenty of criticism in its recent iterations for becoming overly complex.

Relatively small dash vents struggle to flow enough cooling air into the cabin on a 35-40 degree summer day, so you have to wind up the fan speed to gale force, which makes a lot of noise.

A plank-like rear bench is spacious enough, but the backrest is not adjustable and tall passengers sit lightly knees up. The boot, accessed via a horizontally split, power tailgate, is huge. The third row option fits only young kids.

Active steering, stop and go adaptive cruise, 360 degrees/helicopter view camera coverage and automatic parking are included in a comprehensive safety package.

It's a toss up between X5 and the Porsche Cayenne for best in class dynamics. The BMW is a tight, responsive wagon that can be punted along a winding road — sealed or dirt — with complete composure and control at speeds that would confound lesser SUVs. Serious off roading is beyond its brief, though.

We can't tell you what the ride/handling compromise is like in standard form because our car's adaptive air suspension/21-inch alloy wheels/low profile tyres package was sourced entirely from the options list. As tested, the ride varied from plush in Comfort mode to predictably terse though still acceptably compliant in Sport.

BMW's 3.0-litre turbodiesel six offers immediate throttle response, serious grunt from idle to redline, outstanding refinement and close to four-cylinder fuel efficiency. The eight speed automatic works so smoothly and efficiently you don't even notice it.

Compare X5 with the Lexus RX, Mercedes GLE, Porsche Cayenne, Range Rover Sport and VW's sharply-priced (from $89,490) 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel Touareg before you make a decision.

If the hardware is more important than the badge, the VW is difficult to go past, especially given its $47,000 price advantage over the X5 3.0d.

And if you want to save $65,000-$70,000, give the outstanding Hyundai Palisade (from $66,800) a try as well. ■

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Superb turbodiesel engine
- ✔ Dynamics that belie its size and weight
- ✔ Big cabin and boot
- ✔ Well equipped and no options required

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Infotainment is a very deep rabbit hole
- ✘ Air conditioning doesn't flow enough cool air into the cabin on a hot day
- ✘ Flat, unsupportive rear bench
- ✘ Runflat tyres

SPEX (30d)

- Made in the USA
- 3.0-litre turbodiesel six/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 210kW of power at 4000rpm/650Nm of torque from 1500-2500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.1 seconds (claimed)
- 6.9L/100km highway; 9.5L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 206gkm; fuel tank 80 litres
- Max towing weight 2700kg
- Standard: Seven airbags, AEB, adaptive cruise, 360 degree cameras, adaptive LED headlights, automatic high beams, 20-inch alloys with runflat tyres (plus a space saver spare), adaptive suspension dampers, a sunroof, power-operated, hands-free tailgate, leather upholstery, power adjustable sports seats.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Audi Q7, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Volvo XC90, Lexus RX, Genesis GV80

BMW **iX** FROM **$142,900**

BMW's first built from the ground-up electric SUV, the iX, fits between the X5 and X6, so it's a big unit.

Despite its proportions, this is a five-seater only.

Out of the box, the BMW has the driving range to challenge Tesla and the luxury to rival Porsche.

The iX xDrive45 M Sport, priced at $142,900, is the new entry-level model from mid-2025 and has a larger 94.8kWh battery pack.

The iX xDrive50, priced at $185,400, has a 112kWh battery pack (with 105.2kWh of usable capacity) as standard.

At the top of the lineup, the M60, with 455kW and 1100Nm, is priced at $233,400. It takes just 3.8 seconds to reach 100km/h and its 112kWh battery has a claimed range of up to 566km.

According to official European standard tests, the iX xDrive45 has a real-world driving range of 490km to 602km while the iX xDrive50 can do between 550km and 631km.

On test, we weren't able to run the battery completely flat, but a range of up between 580km to 600km (xDrive50) in normal driving seems a safe bet.

Inside, the dash has minimalist "future is now" styling typical of EVs, with a large infotainment screen and a console with only the bare essentials for buttons and dials.

The leather seats look like they're designed for a spaceship; fortunately they're comfortable and practical. Back seat space is limousine-like.

Visibility all around is excellent thanks to the large window area and wide-view side mirrors.

As with most electric cars, the BMW iX drives with an eerie silence.

To address that, BMW appointed German film score composer and record producer Hans Zimmer to come up with some hi-tech zoom sounds.

At the press of a button, the interior of the car can switch from silence to something from the Jetsons. The sound adjusts according to changes in speed.

Acceleration of the iX xDrive50 Sport is astounding for a 2.5-tonne car. From a standing start, BMW claims this model can reach 100km/h in 4.6 seconds.

Rolling acceleration from, say, 40km/h to 80km/h, is almost frightening. Owners will be showing off this feature until their passengers get bored — or throw up.

Acceleration from 100km/h is much less brisk, however.

The BMW iX has good roadholding, though you can feel the weight 'shift' mid-way through a bend.

Of course, the weight of the battery packs in the floor does not move, but there's a point at which you can feel one corner of the car doing more work.

It's not off-putting, just a trait of such big, heavy EVs.

Downsides? There aren't many.

The turning circle is horrendous. At 13 metres, the BMW iX has a broader turning circle than a Toyota LandCruiser four-wheel-drive or Ford Ranger pick-up.

Pre-paid servicing over four years costs $3475, and over six years is $3475. When we asked what that includes, BMW executives shuffled some paperwork and said "safety check," which we interpreted to mean they run an eye over the car.

Other than brake fluid, windscreen washer fluid, battery coolant and air-conditioning filters, there isn't much to check during routine maintenance on EVs. An electric motor has just one moving part. Owners are being gouged on servicing.

To sum up, however, the BMW iX xDrive50 is otherwise rather exceptional.

Based on first impressions, this ground-up, brand-new EV from BMW has all the makings to give the likes of Tesla and Porsche a headache. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ iX xDrive50 has strong acceleration from rest
- ✔ Long range from its 112kWh battery too
- ✔ Stunning design inside and out
- ✔ Extensive list of advanced safety tech
- ✔ Navigation shows instructions on widescreen display using live front-view camera.

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Hefty 2.5 tonne weight makes itself known in corners
- ✘ Acceleration slows dramatically beyond 100km/h
- ✘ Titanic turning circle
- ✘ Why is servicing so expensive?
- ✘ Short BMW warranty

SPEX (xDrive 50)

- Made in Germany
- Twin electric motors/112kWh battery/single speed reduction gear/all-wheel drive
- 385kW of power/765Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 4.6 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum range: 630km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Max towing weight 2500kg
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, safe exit warning, automatic parking, augmented reality video navigation, onboard 5G, wireless Apple CarPlay, wireless phone charging, four zone air, Harman Kardon sound, sunroof, five year Chargefox subscription, leather upholstery, 22-inch alloys, repair kit
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 42%; 5yr: 29%

compare with ...

Mercedes-Benz EQE SUV, Audi Q8 e-tron, Volvo EX90, Porsche Macan

BYD **ATTO 3** FROM **$39,990**

Chinese brand BYD's compact Atto 3 SUV is priced from $39,990 for the new Essential variant that arrived in 2025.

It's well equipped at that price, with smart key entry, digital instruments, 17-inch alloys, adaptive cruise, ambient lighting, front and rear parking sensors, 360-degree camera and fake leather.

The Premium model ($44,990) adds 18-inch wheels, a panoramic sunroof, powered tailgate, roof rails, wireless phone charger, heated front seats and a larger 15.6-inch infotainment screen (up from 12.8 inches). There's also a larger battery that extends the range from a claimed 345km to 420km.

There's also near-field communication that will allows owners to use their smartphone as a key. It's one of many tech touches that appear inspired by Tesla.

The infotainment centre screen packs in plenty, including the ability to customise everything from the indicator sound to the audio from the sound system. You can also spin the screen from landscape to portrait configurations, although it's more of a party trick than anything useful in daily driving.

There's also an array of active safety gear, including blind spot warning and rear cross traffic alert.

However, the auto emergency the forward collision warning is prone to beeping for no reason on tight streets. Over-the-air software updates have helped improve the various driver assistance systems — the Atto 3 gets a five-star ANCAP rating — but there's still work to do.

After-sales backup comes in the form of a six-year/150,000km warranty and servicing at selected BYD and MyCar sites. The battery is warranted for eight years/160,000km.

Atto 3 is officially a compact SUV but its flat floor and traditional SUV shape ensure decent room for four (or five well packed).

Rather than traditional grey plastics, there's a sea of swirls, shapes and interesting finishes. From contrasting red stitching to metal-look sweeps, it's clear the designers were keen to distance the Atto 3 from the mainstream. Guitar-like strings on the door pockets are one of many quirky touches.

There's a lot going on, though, and some design restraint may have yielded a classier result.

On the road there's no shortage of pull from the electric motor, its 150kW/310Nm outputs not far off a hot hatch.

A trio of drive modes adjusts throttle response and outright power, with Sport adding enthusiasm.

But there are issues with the front-drive layout.

A wet road or slightly heavy right foot when darting out of an intersection can induce wheelspin as the front wheels fight for traction. A 2025 update that brought minor design tweaks add grippier tyres, which have helped somewhat.

But there's a slow steering ratio and mushy suspension that ultimately translates to underwhelming dynamics.

In that respect the Atto 3 is not a driver's car. It's more content trundling around the suburbs than attacking a mountain pass.

That's a shame, because the foundations of a solid, capable EV SUV are there. And the bulging list of standard kit embarrasses vehicles from fancier brands.

Beyond this, though, Atto 3's biggest challenge could be convincing people to take a chance with an unknown brand, albeit one that's a behemoth in its homeland. As one of Australia's cheaper EVs, it will be interesting to see how loudly money talks. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★½☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ An affordable EV
- ✔ Standard equipment embarrasses some luxury cars
- ✔ Interesting cabin finishes and design
- ✔ Respectable performance
- ✔ Loaded with tech

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Slow steering and sloppy dynamics
- ✘ Front wheels ever-eager to wheelspin when accelerating hard
- ✘ Cabin maybe too busy with different colours and shapes
- ✘ The brand is unknown here

SPEX (Standard Range)

- Made in China
- Single electric motor/50kWh battery/single-speed automatic/front-wheel drive
- 150kW of power/310Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.3 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum range: 345km
- Warranty: Six years/150,000km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, low-speed AEB, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, surround cameras, lane keep assist, rear cross traffic alert, digital instruments, 12.8 inch rotating touchscreen infotainment, 2x USB C and A ports, digital radio, full length sunroof, heated front seats, 18-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 58%; 5yr: 45%

compare with ...

MG ZS EV, Hyundai Kona Electric, Nissan Leaf, Kia Niro EV, Geely EX5, Leapmotor C10

BYD **SEALION 6** FROM **$42,990**

The Sealion 6 is a mid-sized SUV priced from $42,990.

It comes with a plug-in hybrid system but is priced below that of many regular hybrid models.

That means it can be recharged externally and run on electricity alone before reverting to petrol for longer journeys.

A new Essential model introduced early in 2025 does without some equipment of the Premium ($52,990) that also picks up all-wheel drive and a head-up display.

But there's still plenty of gear for the money, including a panoramic sunroof, powered driver's seat, powered tailgate, digital instrument cluster and wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

The fake leather trim looks OK, too and is indicative of generally good finishes and materials throughout.

And the Sealion 6 has vehicle-to-load capability that allows regular household devices to be powered via standard powerpoints.

The Premium gets more power and all-wheel drive as well as heated and ventilated front seats, 10-speaker audio, 360-degree camera, head-up display and a larger 15.6-inch infotainment screen (the one on the Essential is 12.8 inches).

It's covered by a six-year, 150,000km warranty.

The Essential has 145kW and 300Nm from its electric motor driving the front wheels, translating to decent around-town pull. It lacks the instantaneous feel and immediacy of EVs, but there's a healthy surge that makes for easy acceleration.

Under the skin is a 1.5-litre four-cylinder that can largely lay dormant around town if you're vigilant with charging. But call for more and it can add to the e-motor thrust, for a combined 160kW/300Nm.

The Premium adds a second electric motor for a total output of 238kW/500Nm, which makes for more spirited acceleration.

Push the throttle through the final click point on the pedal and it'll eventually wake the petrol engine for added high speed thrust.

But with modest outputs from the eco-focussed 1.5-litre four-cylinder engine, the majority of the work is being done by electrons. That's the impression you get from the driver's seat, too.

In hybrid mode the muted hum of an engine is often part of the generally hushed driving experience as the engine spins a generator to create electricity.

Go for an overtake and the engine may also drive the wheels, although it can take a moment to have an effect, the delayed reaction requiring an adjustment to the driving style.

The Sealion 6's steering is light and vague and the suspension soft and without the body control of similarly-sized rivals. Throw bumps and bends into the mix and it can bounce around and demand that fraction more attention to keep things pointing the right direction. In short, it's not as surefooted and stout as a Mazda, Kia, Hyundai, Honda or Toyota.

Our experience suggests the range estimate can be optimistic, with circa-1200km predictions more likely to reduce to 1000km or less in the real world.

Still, the Sealion 6 can easily cover big distances while having the benefit of electric-only driving when close to a charger.

While the official fuel figure is as low as 1.1 litres per 100km expect more like 5-6L/100km once the battery has been depleted.

That's still good, as is the space and practicality.

Of course, one of the big things with a PHEV is being able to recharge it externally.

Charging at home can be done at up to 6.6kW, translating to a circa-3.5-hour charge from a home wallbox. Plug into a standard powerpoint and you're looking at about nine hours.

Ultimately it's the Sealion 6's ability to run on electricity that is its biggest asset.

And with fuel use similar to a RAV4 Hybrid once the battery has been depleted it mounts a compelling case for those looking to lower running costs. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★⯪
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Sharp price and loads of standard equipment
- ✔ Decent performance with EV-like driving experience
- ✔ Spacious and functional five-seat body
- ✔ Matches regular hybrids when running in hybrid mode

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Like all PHEVs you need home charging to make the most out of it
- ✘ Suspension is comfy but lacks surefooted feel of some rivals
- ✘ Forget 1.1L/100km fuel use claims; it's more like 5-6L/100km in hybrid mode

SPEX (Essential)

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre series/parallel petrol/electric hybrid/front-wheel drive
- 160kW of power/300Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 8.5 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 92km,
- Warranty: 6 years/150,000km
- Standard: 7 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, over-the-air software updates, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 70%; 5yr: 52%

compare with ...

Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV, Toyota RAV4, GWM Haval H6GT, Honda CR-V, Nissan X-Trail e-Power

BYD **SEALION 7** FROM **$54,990**

It's hard to deem BYD as an upstart in Australia these days, with the Chinese brand now delivering on an aggressive model rollout that even includes an electrified entrant into our cut-throat dual-cab segment in the Shark 6.

The 2025 Sealion 7, though, might be the model that will makes the most noise (not literally of course), as the mid-size electric SUV is sizing up the Tesla Model Y to knock it off its best-selling EV perch in Australia. It's particularly pertinent given BYD is the only other new brand in our market that has managed to develop a similar cult-like following.

The Sealion 7 arrives in Australia in two trim levels — the Premium, at $54,990, and the Performance, at $63,990 — with those prices designed to slide under its key competitors.

The key difference between the two models are their powertrains and batteries, and so the equipment lists are pretty similar.

Both get all-LED lighting, 19-inch alloy wheels, a panoramic glass roof and an auto-opening boot. Inside, there are leather-look seats that are both heated and ventilated up front, a big 15.6-inch central touchscreen (which performs the BYD party trick of being able to be rotate from portrait to landscape orientation) that has both Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, a second 10.25-inch screen for the driver, and a 12-speaker stereo.

The main things separating the Premium from the Performance, at least in terms of equipment, are 20-inch alloys, heating for the rear seats, and a heated steering wheel.

What does separate the two, though, is power. While the Premium arrives with a single rear-mounted (meaning rear-wheel drive) electric motor that produces 230kW and 380Nm, the Performance adds a second motor at the front axle (for all-wheel drive) that dials up those outputs to 390kW and 690Nm. Those increases have a predictable impact on performance, with the zero to 100km/h time falling from 6.7 seconds to 4.5 seconds.

Both Sealion 7 models are also home to the same 82.56kWh battery, but the Premium is the range star of the two, travelling 482km on a full charge, compared to the 456km of the Performance.

Now, I know those acceleration figures sound impressive on paper, but in many ways the Premium appears the smarter buy in the Sealion 7 range. We have only piloted the Performance model to date, and while the power delivery is smooth and forward progression effortless, it feels a little too powerful for a vehicle too heavy to tempt you to carve mountain roads, and in which the rest of the engineering package doesn't quite live up to the motors.

However, it's quiet and feels refined in the cabin, and the suspension does a good job of ironing out lumps and bumps, but we found when we lifted off the accelerator the Performance felt like it was still pushing forwards for a beat or two, which can be either slightly disconcerting or mildly terrifying, depending on how fast you're going.

The Premium is cheaper, travels further between charges, and is hardly a slouch on the acceleration front. ▪

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★½
Handling
★★★½☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Comfortable ride
- ✔ Prodigious power in the Performance
- ✔ V2L functionality
- ✔ Space galore
- ✔ Priced well against Tesla Model Y
- ✔ Long equipment list

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Drive doesn't quite match the acceleration
- ✘ Sub-500km range in both models
- ✘ Fairly uninspired design, inside and out

SPEX

- Made in China
- Single rear-mounted electric motor, RWD, or dual-motor, AWD, single-speed gearbox
- 230kW and 380Nm or 390kW and 690Nm
- 82.56kW battery
- Warranty: Six years, 150,000km
- Standard: Eight airbags, adaptive cruise, front and rear cross traffic alert, electric front seats, panoramic sunroof, heated and ventilated front seats, power adjustable front seats, 15.6-inch central touchscreen
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 64%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, Hyundai Ioniq 5, Kia EV6, Ford Mustang Mach-E, Volkswagen ID.4

BYD **SHARK 6** FROM **$57,900**

The Shark 6 was the first plug-in hybrid ute in Australia. Selling from $57,900, the dual-cab four-wheel drive provides a sharply-priced electrified rival to the Ford Ranger and Toyota Hilux that dominate with diesel.

There are powered, heated and ventilated front seats, dual-zone ventilation, head-up display, front and rear parking sensors, 360-degree camera, wireless phone charging, smart key entry and a connected app that allows you to use a smartphone as the key.

There's also a 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster and 15.6-inch central touchscreen.

A suite of safety gear includes auto braking, driver monitoring, blind spot warning and speed sign recognition, helping the Shark achieve a five-star ANCAP safety rating.

Faux leather covers the seats and there are some orange highlights to liven the cabin.

The Shark 6 comes as a four-door with five seats and it's among the biggest of the mainstream utes. A broad cabin means plenty of elbow room and getting three (comfortably) across the rear is achievable. Those in the back also get decent knee space and a flat floor helps with foot space.

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★⯪
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

It's beneath the bonnet where things get interesting.

The Shark 6 has two electric motors powered by a 29.58kWh battery. It can drive about 80km on electricity alone (the official claim is 100km).

There's also a 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbocharged engine that predominantly acts as a generator to extend the range.

Once the battery has been depleted the Shark is claimed to use about 7.9L/100km, similar to diesel rivals, although expect the hybrid to be more frugal around town.

With a 60-litre fuel tank the Shark 6's claimed combined range is about 800km.

The petrol engine can also drive the wheels above 70km/h to boost power slightly.

Speaking of which, there's a claimed 321kW in total, roughly double that of garden variety utes. The Shark 6's 650Nm also beats regular utes.

That said, it's a heavy beast, at 2.7 tonnes, hundreds of kilos more than most utes. So the drivetrain has to work to keep things moving.

The electric motors do the bulk of the work — and all of it at lower speeds. That's because there's no traditional gearbox.

The engine drives only the front wheels and only at higher speeds, adding 135kW/260Nm to the tally. It's the e-motors doing most of the work; the front motor makes 170kW/310Nm and the rear 150kW/340Nm.

There's no drive shaft running from front to rear, leaving the electric motor as the only thing powering the back wheels.

It essentially operates as an electric car much of the time, albeit with an engine occasionally whirring in the background. It's not as hyperactive to throttle inputs as most EVs — there's a delayed response — but it's a lot perkier than turbo-diesel utes.

Riding on 18-inch road-focused Continental tyres there's decent grip. The Shark uses independent coil sprung suspension front and rear, going against the ute grain.

It'll lean when pushed, but for a high rider it's respectably well behaved. Quick direction changes are nicely controlled and the Shark outclasses most utes on bitumen.

The rougher the terrain, though, the more some compromises creep in.

That independent rear suspension can occasionally leave a wheel dangling. The traction control does an OK job of sending drive to the wheels with traction, but without a transfer case to multiply torque steeper inclines can see the Shark reach its limit.

When you're edging over car killing rocks it doesn't have the throttle control you can get in traditional 4WDs.

But for rough road driving and many off-road situations it's surprisingly capable.

Perhaps the biggest issue for some with the Shark 6 will be its 790kg payload and 2500kg tow capacity. For those wanting to get serious — including loading up with accessories — it will limit how much you can pack in.

Still, the Shark 6 has shaken the diesel domination in the ute market — and it's not the only one.

Those wanting the reassurance of a big name may choose to stick with the Ford/Toyota heavy hitters.

Those prepared to look beyond the badge and embrace what could be a new force in the ute segment may be surprised at the substance on offer from the Shark 6. It's not perfect — no ute is — but as a value proposition with great on-road manners it's something of a game changer. ■

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Spacious body
- ✔ Sharp value and luxury-like levels of gear
- ✔ Double the power of most utes makes for great acceleration
- ✔ Raises the bar for ute driving dynamics on-road

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Payload and tow capacity lower than most utes
- ✘ Not as competent as traditional utes in extreme off-road situations
- ✘ Heavy body
- ✘ Can be thirsty in hybrid mode

SPEX

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol engine; two electric motors driving all four wheels
- 135kW/260Nm (petrol engine), 170kW/310Nm (front e-motor), 150kW/340Nm (rear e-motor), 321kW/650Nm total system output
- 0-100km/h in 5.7 seconds (claimed)
- About 80km of EV range; 7.9L/100km when running in hybrid mode; 29.58kWh battery; 60L fuel tank; CO2 emissions are 46g/km
- Warranty: 6 years/150,000km
- Standard: 7 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, exit warning, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, child presence detection, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, heated and ventilated front seats, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 73%; 5yr: 53%

compare with ...

GWM Cannon Alpha, Ford Ranger PHEV, Toyota Hilux, Mitsubishi Triton, Mazda BT-50, Nissan Navara, Volkswagen Amarok

CADILLAC **LYRIQ** FROM **$117,000**

The Lyriq relaunched the quintessentially American Cadillac brand locally after a decades-long hiatus. Rather than big engines and garish wings the modern Cadillac is powered by electric motors and has sharp, crisp lines to differentiate it from the established luxury brands it will compete with.

The Lyriq is priced from $117,000 for the Luxury model with the Sport another $2000.

Each shares the same basic list of equipment but the Luxury goes big on chrome while the Sport replaces some of those glistening highlights with dark touches and body coloured door handles.

Each gets a panoramic sunroof, powered tailgate, three-zone ventilation, dual-zone ambient lighting, 360-degree camera, heated and folding exterior mirrors and powered front seats with inbuilt massage, ventilation and heating functions.

Imitation leather trim, known as Inteluxe, is standard or there's optional real leather, including Nappa.

A huge 33-inch display screen integrates the instrument cluster and central infotainment functions and there's a 19-speaker sound system by specialist Austrian brand AKG; it has headrests in the front speakers and noise cancelling for bumps.

Traditional wood and leather finishes dominate in the spacious cabin and there are enough silver finishes to brighten the cabin.

A high-ish window line gives the impression of being nestled into the cabin, although in reality there's SUV-like height to the driving position.

A slide-out tray in the dash (it's not always smooth in its operation, indicative of some occasional quality hiccups) is great for phones or valuables and in a Tesla-like touch accessing the glovebox is done by pressing a virtual button in the screen.

There's also no shortage of Cadillac crests reinforcing the brand that so many Australians know but which has to convince people to go American over the European brands that dominate in the luxury market. Some of those crests are functional, too; press the one on the back to open the boot, for example, while accessing the side-mounted charge port is also done by pressing one of the Cadillac badges.

A sizeable 102kWh battery provides 530km of range and fast charging can add up to 128km in 10 minutes.

There are eight airbags, blind spot recognition with steering assistance, forward collision alert and autonomous emergency braking.

The lane departure and collision warning systems can get too eager with warnings, which are delivered as vibrations to the driver's seat.

Two electric motors deliver a combined 388kW and 610Nm and drive all four wheels.

It's quick and will have more than enough thrust for most owners.

That said, the car is also heavy. Granted, there's currently no such thing as a featherweight EV, but at almost 2.8 tonnes it's porkier than its rivals.

That dulls performance slightly, although with such lofty numbers it's still ample and makes for effortless pull whenever it's required.

It's impressively quiet with little in the way of tyre and wind noise and the Lyriq is suitably plush and settles swiftly over bumps.

There's no hiding its heft, though. At almost 2.8 tonnes it's a weighty beast.

And while there's loads of grip, quick direction changes remind you that the laws of physics still apply.

It's a car that feels more comfortable nestling into a long, sweeping bend — or cruising on a freeway — rather than being asked to dart from one hairpin to the next.

The Lyriq is something fresh in the luxury market, albeit with a brand name with more than a century of heritage.

While it's playing in rarefied EV air north of $100K, it brings space and some distinctive American metal to the table.

But Cadillac still has a mammoth task elbowing the more established luxury brands out of the way if it wants to tempt Aussies to switch sides. ■

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Distinctive design inside and out
✔ Huge infotainment screen
✔ Spacious cabin
✔ Plenty of power

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Pricy for a brand trying to muscle in on the luxury market
✘ Heavy body takes the edge off the driving experience
✘ Occasional quality hiccups
✘ Miniscule brand presence and after-sales suppport

SPEX

- Made in USA
- 388kW of power/610Nm of torque
- Claimed max range: 530km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, imitation leather, heated steering wheel, power tailgate, 21-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Lexus RZ, BMW iX, Audi Q6, Porsche Macan, Tesla Model Y

CHERY TIGGO **4** FROM **$23,990**

Head turning looks are one thing but a head turning price tag is an even better way to lure budget conscious buyers, as the Tiggo 4 Pro demonstrates.

Priced from $23,990 drive-away the entry point to Chery's line-up undercuts traditional rivals by thousands.

And with dual-zone ventilation, 17-inch alloys, smart key entry and dual 10.25-inch screens in that entry-level Urban model it goes above what some of those bigger name brands offer. The doors also lock automatically when you walk away from the car, so not fumbling for the keys.

Safety, too, is top notch with a five-star ANCAP rating and plethora of assistance systems that include auto braking in forward and reverse, blind spot monitoring, speed sign recognition, adaptive cruise control and rear cross traffic alert.

Less endearing is the welcome chime that plays music at you for what seems like an eternity. Luckily it can be switched off.

Splash out another $3000 on the Ulimate and you get heated front seats, a powered driver's seat, faux leather trim, 360-degree camera and a sunroof. The wheels also step up to 18 inches.

All of which starts to look like something of a bargain, the seven-year warranty adding to that.

There's the occasional oversight, such as the requirement to plug into a cable to activate the Apple CarPlay connectivity (Android Auto is wireless).

And despite hard buttons to adjust the ventilation, any adjustments temporarily bring up a separate climate control menu on the main screen, which seems a waste of real estate.

Despite its diminutive dimensions the Tiggo 4 is refreshingly spacious in the cabin. Those up front will have little to complain about and while three across the rear is a stretch there's OK leg and headroom. A 380-litre boot is equally acceptable.

Back seat passengers even get fed fresh air sent aft via vents, reinforcing the attention to detail that also runs to better quality materials than most rivals.

Under the bonnet is a 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbo with modest outputs of 108kW and 210Nm.

It's a tad lazy down low but muscles up once the turbo kicks in, in turn providing acceptable acceleration.

The dynamic equation is also a letdown. The Tiggo 4 has soft suspension and uber light steering, something that makes it difficult to get a read on what's going on at ground level.

It's something that ultimately detracts from driver confidence. The tyres also aren't overloaded with grip, something more pronounced in the wet.

So the Tiggo 4 is a small SUV that arguably does its best work stationary. From most angles it excels in what it delivers in terms of equipment, cabin ambience and a bargain price tag.

It does so at the expense of driving manners. And while few expect a budget car to tickle the senses, when rivals can at least at a degree of confidence with hints of enjoyment it reinforces the Tiggo 4's least impressive attribute.

However, it's impossible to ignore the sheer value of a car that packs plenty in for not much money. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★⯪☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★★⯪
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Bargain price tag and seven-year warranty
- ✔ Thoroughly respectable equipment list, especially in the Ultimate
- ✔ Spacious by small SUV standards
- ✔ Nicely presented cabin

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Lazy engine at low revs and occasional mismatch with the transmission
- ✘ Light steering and wallowy suspension sap driver confidence
- ✘ Infotainment screen gets temporarily taken over by the ventilation display

SPEX (Urban)

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/ CVT auto/front-wheel drive
- 160kW/300Nm of torque
- 6.4L/100km highway; 8.9L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO2 emissions are 166g/km; fuel tank is 51 litres
- Warranty: seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, digital radio, 17-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 67%; 5yr: 59%

compare with ...

MG ZS, Haval Jolion, Mitsubishi ASX, Hyundai Venue, Kia Stonic

CHERY **C5** FROM **$29,990**

The C5 was formerly known as the Omoda 5 but has been rebranded for 2025 because Omoda is being spun out into a separate brand.

Priced from $29,990 drive-away, the five-door compact SUV is available in two variants, from the entry-level Urban or pricier Ultimate, the latter costing $34,990 drive-away.

Both come with a powered driver's seat, smart key entry, 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster and a 10.25-inch central infotainment screen incorporating wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

It pays to know your way around that screen because things can get busy diving into menus and figuring out how to do sometimes basic tasks.

All models also come with a suite of active safety tech that incorporates auto braking in forward and reverse, blind spot warning, traffic sign recognition and adaptive cruise control.

Some of those driver assistance systems can be overly sensitive and take over when you don't want them to or beep when it's not required, although Chery has applied software updates to temper the annoyance.

The Ultimate also gets heated front seats, powered tailgate, synthetic leather trim, wireless phone charger, 360-degree camera, sunroof and snazzy red brake calipers.

Combined with a bold grille and distinctive design at the rear it's an imposing - borderline polarising - look.

At least it's all nicely put together and the interior presentation above what some may expect at this price.

The C5 is powered by a 1.5-litre turbo engine, although there are also more expensive electric versions badged as the E5.

Whereas the petrol engine makes 108kW and 210Nm the E5's single electric motor punches out 150kW and 340Nm.

Unsurprisingly it's the EV with the performance advantage, and it backs it up with 430km of range between charges.

Home charging can be done at up to 9.9kW for a full charge of the 61.1kWh battery in about seven hours. Faster charging is a lot more leisurely, maxing out at 80kW, something that makes it less useful for road trips.

The E5's biggest challenge is getting the generous torque to the bitumen through the front wheels. Too eager on the throttle – especially out of corners – and it's easy to chirp the traction control into action.

Even the petrol engine can lead to some tugging of the steering wheel and wheelspin at it tries to get the power down. As part of the shift to C5 nomenclature the C5 also picked up a new six-speed twin-clutch transmission, which we haven't tried yet.

Still, the C5's dynamic package doesn't match it with rivals from better known brands.

Sure, it's comfortable. But between light steering and softness elsewhere it doesn't have the sense of solidity and confidence some in the small SUV space do well.

That's a shame because there's plenty to like with value.

That said, some of the C5's biggest competition could come from within. The smaller Tiggo 4 is cheaper and more convincing on the value and driving front.

All of which is a nice problem to have for a brand still finding its feet. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★⯪☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Sharp pricing
- ✔ Seven-year warranty
- ✔ Quality finishes and presentation
- ✔ Decent smattering of equipment

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Occasionally overbearing driver assistance systems
- ✘ Soft suspension lacks control, impacting confidence
- ✘ Sometimes struggles to get power to the ground

SPEX (Urban)

- 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/ six-speed twin clutch auto/front-wheel drive
- 108kW of power/210Nm of torque
- 8.8L/100m city, 5.8L/100km highway, 91 regular, CO2 emissions are 160g/km, fuel tank is 51L
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: 7 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, powered driver's seat, blind spot monitoring, digital radio, 17-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 53%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-30, Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Toyota Corolla Cross

CHERY TIGGO **7 PRO** FROM **$29,990**

The Chery Tiggo 7 Pro is a five-seat, mid-sized SUV targeting big names such as the Toyota RAV4, Mazda CX-5 and Nissan X-Trail, although newer value-focused propositions such as the GWM Haval H6 and MG HS are also in its sights.

Priced from $29,990 for the front-drive SE, the Tiggo 7's main attraction is a standard equipment list that beats more expensive players, although its range no longer offers all-wheel drive.

There's 18-inch wheels, a panoramic sunroof, faux leather trim, six-way powered driver seat, and dual curved 12.3-inch screens incorporating wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

You can select between three very different layouts that change the look markedly, although in any mode there's the occasional frustration; adjust the air flow, for example, and the AC display temporarily takes over the screen.

We also had Apple CarPlay fail to activate sometimes, forcing a dive into the menus to reconnect it manually. Digital radio is missing, too.

The SE+ ($33,990) adds hated front seats with a powered front passenger sear, power-folding exterior mirrors, powered tailgate, wireless phone charging, 360-degree camera and a panoramic sunroof with powered sunshade.

The SE+ also offers a black painted exterior roof option not available on the entry-level SE.

The front seats have fixed headrests for a sporty look and back it up with support in the right places.

Those in the rear get great headroom and foot space, so even adults will have little to whinge about. There are air vents and a single USB-C for gadgets.

The tall boot does without a luggage cover but has a decent flat space along with 60/40 split/fold functionality.

Safety is taken care of with a lengthy suite of driver assist systems that includes blind spot warning, speed sign recognition, auto braking in forward and reverse, rear cross traffic alert and a driver monitoring system. And if you open a door when parked it will alert you to vehicles approaching from behind.

Despite ticking the required safety boxes, though, there are issues with how it all works.

The lane departure system can get confused about where lane markings are and often jerks the steering wheel. It's disconcerting and on suburban roads requires additional focus, although over-the-air software updates have improved those systems.

The system also wants to talk at you for some functions, including when changing drive modes. Its warnings of not concentrating are also occasionally over-eager.

Beneath the bonnet is a 1.6-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol delivering 137kW and 275Nm. It takes a moment to wake up before delivering respectable thrust.

Getting the Tiggo 7's front wheels turning requires some finesse because the seven-speed twin-clutch transmission can be grabby when engaging. Convincing the stubby electronic shifter to land on the selection you're chasing can also be an exercise in frustration, requiring a distinct press of the button, foot on the brake and positive shift action.

Throw in some sponginess in the suspension and it's easy to trigger a chirp from the inside front wheel if you're enthusiastic taking off. Chery's official claim is a thirsty 9.3 litres per 100km of premium unleaded, but it's easy to exceed that.

This multitude of not quite right things in the Tiggo 7 Pro add up to a car that looks great in the showroom, but is less impressive once the wheels start turning. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★⯪☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★⯪☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Sharp prices
✔ Long list of standard equipment compared with similarly-priced rivals
✔ Punchy engine once the turbo is boosting
✔ Generous rear cabin space

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Needs premium unleaded and uses a lot of it
✘ Engine and transmission lack finesse
✘ Driver assist systems can be overly intrusive
✘ Suspension is soft and not very well controlled
✘ Infotainment system and chimes can get frustrating

SPEX (SE+)

- Made in China
- 1.6-litre turbopetrol/seven speed dual clutch automatic/front-wheel drive
- 137kW of power at 5500rpm/275Nm of torque from 2000-4000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 9.5 seconds (claimed)
- 5.8L/100km highway; 9.3L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 163gkm; fuel tank is 51 litres
- Max towing weight N/A
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive/speed control cruise, lane keeping, blindspot monitoring, door opening warning, rear cross traffic alert, 360 degree cameras, speed sign recognition, dual 12.3 inch digital screens, wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, navigation, wireless phone charging, faux leather, sunroof, 18 inch alloys, full size spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 54%; 5yr: 39%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-5, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Toyota RAV4, Nissan X-Trail, Mitsubishi Outlander

CHERY TIGGO **8 PRO MAX** FROM **$41,990**

The Tiggo 8 is a large SUV priced against mid-sized rivals from big name brands.

Priced from $41,990 drive-away it's essentially a stretched and more upmarket version of the Tiggo 7.

It makes the mid-sized SUV is one of the most affordable seven-seaters on the market.

Even in entry-level Urban guise the Tiggo 8 comes with a list of standard equipment usually reserved for more expensive machinery. It gets 18-inch alloy wheels, synthetic leather, ambient lighting, 360-degree camera, wireless phone charging, a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster and 12.3-inch central infotainment screen. The front seats have heating and ventilation and electric adjustment with memory settings.

The Elite ($43,990) and you pick up a powered tailgate, heated exterior mirrors, forward-facing dash camera and third-row air vents with fan speed adjustment.

The $47,990 Ultimate picks up all-wheel drive, tinted windows, a panoramic sunroof, exterior puddle lights and an extra two speakers (for 10 in total).

But it's the three rows of seats Chery hopes will attract families looking for some pampering on a budget.

The cabin deviates from cheap and cheerful plastics to pack in stuff that looks like leather, some wood-look trim and enough silver highlights to lift the ambience above the mainstream. It's neatly done and combines with plush front seats for an upmarket look

Touch sensitive buttons on the dash adjust the ventilation and window demisting, each of which drags up associated menus on the main display, itself incorporating wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

A fixed button adjacent to the volume roller adjustment near the stubby gear selector takes you to the "Smart Driving" settings that allows switching of the various driver assistance systems.

Such driver aids were a bugbear in recent Cherys and while they're vastly improved there's still headway to streamline the steering assistance.

Get too wound up delving into the menus, too, and it warns you that you've been distracted for a long time.

Elsewhere there's the occasional oddity, such as the convex centre mirror that allows more view of the window pillars and roof but requires an adjustment to your eyes' focal length.

Those in the middle row of the Tiggo 8 are well catered for but the third row is best reserved for smaller humans; at least you can slide the middle row forward as a legroom trade-off.

It's easiest getting folding the middle row from the driver's side because that's the side with a single cushion (the other side incorporates the outer and middle seats).

The Tiggo 8 also delivers on performance, although its ambitious quad exhaust outlets are more about the aesthetic.

There's a 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo engine making 180kW and 375Nm.

It's a perky engine that pulls strongly from low in the rev range, causing occasional issues with traction in the front-drive models. It's especially prevalent if you're punching out of a tight corner, where the traction control chimes in to contain any slips. A wet road amplifies the issue.

There are no such issues in the all-wheel drive Ultimate.

However, there's still the occasional hesitation with the seven-speed twin-clutch automatic. It's noticeable from a standstill and also when accelerating through the lower gears.

The steering is mushy and lifeless and isn't helped by some inconsistencies under acceleration.

Darting between Normal and Sport mode adds some weight but doesn't address the dullness. Plus having "sport mode selected" announced when switching between modes is overkill.

Suspension is soft for some roly poly through bends.

The ride in the Elite is generally comfortable; lower profile 19-inch tyres the Ultimate picks up more initial stiffness.

Ultimately, then, value and a well-presented cabin are the Tiggo's strongest suits. A suitably long equipment list could be enough of a sweetener and convince those value-conscious buyers to overlook some of its foibles. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★⯪☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Bargain price for a seven-seater
✔ Nicely presented cabin
✔ Hearty engine

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Front-wheel drive models prone to wheelspin
✘ Sloppy steering and mushy suspension
✘ Twin-clutch transmission can be inconsistent
✘ Drive assistance systems sometimes gives false warnings

SPEX (Tiggo 8)

- Made in China
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol engine, seven-speed twin-clutch automatic
- 180kW of power/375Nm of torque
- 11.1L/100km city, 6.5L/100km highway, 191g/km CO2 emissions, 57L fuel tank
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Ten airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, faux leather, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 61%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Honda CR-V, Nissan X-Trail, Hyundai Santa Fe, Kia Sorento, Toyota Kluger, Mitsubishi Outlander

CHEVROLET **SILVERADO 1500** FROM **$130,500**

Meet the Chevrolet Silverado, brought to you by Holden Special Vehicles.

With the shutdown of Holden, General Motors is now represented in Australia by a new brand called General Motors Specialty Vehicles (GMSV), which opens up opportunities for models beyond the Chevrolet badge.

Silverado 1500 LTZ, tested here, is $130,5000; ZR2 is $141,500. Both are powered by a 313kW/624Nm 6.2-litre V8, with a 10-speed auto and dual range 4WD.

Silverado is also offered with a 332kW/1234Nm 6.6-litre V8 turbodiesel, in LTZ Premium specification, at $166,500.

Prices increased in 2025 with no equipment changes since the last update in late 2023. The 1500 ZR2 got more off road capability, with front and rear locking diffs and 296mm of ground clearance. Both 1500s also got a new dash with a 13.4 inch infotainment touchscreen and digital instruments.

Having tested the Ram 1500 V8 and Chevrolet Silverado V8 just days apart, it's evident that although the Ram has a plush ride, the Chevrolet is quieter and more refined, and has less suspension flutter on patchwork roads.

The Chevrolet 1500 also has more poke. Using precision timing equipment, it did the 0 to 100kmh dash in 6.4 seconds time after time without raising a sweat. This is not far off hot hatch territory. A VW Golf GTI stops the clock in about 6.1 seconds.

Of course, it's not a race car but it's a telling insight into how much mumbo this big rig has.

Key to the epic acceleration and smooth experience is the well-calibrated 10-speed auto. It also helps deliver surprising fuel efficiency.

During my time with the car, the fuel economy averaged between 11 and 13 litres per 100km, admittedly with mostly freeway driving and travelling at about 80kmh on inter urban roads.

I didn't test it while towing (maximum capacity is 3500kg with a 50mm tow ball and 4500kg with a 70mm tow ball) but colleagues say consumption climbed to about 20L/100km with a 2500kg trailer behind.

Fortunately the fuel tank is a useful 91 litres. The dash showed a real world driving range of more than 750km between refills, if you can achieve an average consumption figure of 12L/100km.

The 6.6-litre turbodiesel can be had with even greater towing capacity, up to 5.2 tonnes.

Cabin storage is huge and the centre console looks like it could double as a swimming pool. Back seat space is enormous; the lower seat cushions easily fold up and click into place to create a massive flat load floor.

The ute tub is massive, too, though payload is capped at 712kg due to suspension designed for comfort rather than hefty loads.

The power tailgate is a handy feature when your hands are full. You just need to press a button on the tailgate or on the key fob and it will open or close.

Foot pegs in the corners of the rear bumper make it easier to step up to check or access a load.

Overall, the Silverado 1500 is an impressive machine. That said, it comes with a hefty price premium versus its RAM rival, and the new Ford F-150, which starts at $106,950. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ New generation truck looks the business
- ✔ Acres of space in the cabin and ute tub
- ✔ V8 grunt and well calibrated 10-speed auto
- ✔ Good driver assist safety tech
- ✔ High quality conversion
- ✔ High resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Gear selector stalk is behind the steering wheel
- ✘ Too big for some car parks and fast food drive-thrus
- ✘ Short warranty
- ✘ Pricey compared with RAM1500

SPEX (1500 LTZ)

- Made in the USA; converted in Australia
- 6.2-litre V8 petrol/10-speed auto/ dual range 4x4
- 313kW of power at 5600rpm/624Nm of torque at 4100rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.4 seconds
- 12.3L/100km combined; fuel tank is 91 litres
- Max towing weight: 4500kg
- Warranty: Three years/100,000km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, camera, tyre pressure monitoring, low-speed autonomous braking, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, blind spot and rear cross traffic alert, leather upholstery, heated and cooled front seats, heated rear seat, sunroof, power tailgate, parking sensors
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 76%; 5yr: 59%

compare with ...

Ram 1500, Ford F-150, Toyota Tundra, Jeep Gladiator

CUPRA **BORN** FROM **$59,990**

The Cupra Born is a compact electric hatch that is trying to sell on its sporty side. Cupra even refers to it as hot.

It's priced from $59,990, although Cupra has knocked many thousands off ahead of a minor update in 2025. The expectation is that the price will be adjusted downwards in line with an EV market that has shifted.

For that you get a five-seat hatch with 19-inch wheels, wireless phone charging, smart key entry, ambient lighting, 360-degree camera, tyre pressure monitors, a 5.3-inch digital instrument cluster and a 12-inch central infotainment screen with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. It's a shame its functionality is occasionally flawed, such as the fiddly slider control to adjust the volume.

Pay another $2600 for the Performance pack and the wheels step up to 20 inches in diameter but lose their copper finish that matches the copper highlights elsewhere. There are also adjustable dampers.

Buyers can also option an Interior pack for $2900. It brings electrically adjustable front seats with massagers and heating as well as Dinamica trim material and a nine-speaker Beats sound system.

The Performance and Interior packs both reduce the seating capacity to four, with the centre rear seat instead replaced with a storage binnacle.

It may be a compact vehicle from the outside – it's similar in size to a Toyota Corolla — but the Cupra Born is refreshingly spacious inside.

That's because it sits on an architecture designed from the outset as an electric vehicle, allowing the optimal placement of components including batteries and the rear-mounted motor.

The front seats hug and support nicely and the built-in headrests add to the sporty theme.

Headroom is less forthcoming in the back, but it'll suffice for most — and there's respectable knee room, although no rear air vents. Three across the rear would be tight; if you've optioned the Performance and/or Interior packs then obviously that's not a choice given there are only two seats.

The cabin is a mix of quality finishes and materials. From the modern seats with recycled plastics and tactile finishes to the padded centre console and furry top on the central sliding binnacle lid. The carbon fibre-inspired steering wheel boss and copper highlights liberally applied throughout top off what is a classy cabin.

The Born gets a single electric motor powering the rear wheels. It makes 170kW and 310Nm, which is similar to some hot hatches.

However, while there's that fantastic near-instantaneous response of an e-motor as well as an engaging surge that continues as speed builds, the Born is also hindered by weight. The base model is a portly 1927kg while the four-seat version is 1960kg.

With a claimed range of 511km for the base vehicle and 475km for the Performance pack there's plenty between charges. A fast DC charge at up to 170kW can boost the battery from 10 to 80 per cent in 34 minutes.

On the road the steering is accurate and predictable and works as well zipping through roundabouts as it does on a winding road.

The 19-inch tyres have clearly been chosen for efficiency, with a tendency to reach their limits of adhesion once you up the tempo.

Step up to the 20-inch tyres and there's greater confidence; the Cupra drive mode adds meaningful weight to the steering and a more energetic feel.

The adjustable dampers also add to the control, especially over mid-corner bumps.

At its recommended price, though, the Born is a tough sell against more convincing EVs such as the Tesla Model 3.

Plus, it's more warm than hot.

But with the pencil sharpened it brings a refreshing mix of driving engagement and practicality in a package that also looks slick. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Classy cabin and sensible size
- ✔ Slick driving manners
- ✔ Discounts make it more appealing

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Not quite the hot hatch Cupra would like you to think it is
- ✘ 19-inch tyres not overloaded with grip
- ✘ More expensive models only get four seats
- ✘ Infotainment screen can be fiddly

SPEX

- Made in Germany
- Single electric motor/single-speed transmission/rear-wheel drive
- 170kW of power/310Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.0 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 511km
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, ambient lighting, navigation, digital radio, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 53%; 5yr: 40%

compare with ...

Tesla Model 3, Polestar 2, BMW i4, BYD Seal, Hyundai Ioniq 6

CUPRA **FORMENTOR** FROM **$51,990**

The badge resembles an alien and some of the styling appears to be inspired by Lamborghini.

Meet Cupra, the performance offshoot of Volkswagen-owned Spanish brand Seat. Like another VW-owned brand, Skoda, the Cupra range is underpinned by VW platforms and mechanicals, including drivetrains.

However Cupra is pitched as a much sportier brand than the relatively prosaic Skoda. You just have to look at the different styling to work that out. In many ways it's a case of same chocolates, but in very different boxes.

You'll also find a lot of VW bits under the bonnet of an Audi, but that's something VW — and certainly Audi — don't advertise.

Formentor is a mid-size SUV that, like VW's Tiguan, uses Golf underpinnings.

Formentor V, with a 140kW 2.0-litre turbopetrol/seven-speed dual clutch automatic/all-wheel drivetrain, is $51,990. VZ, with the 2.0-litre chipped for 180kW, is $56,990 and VZe, a plug-in hybrid with a 1.4-litre turbopetrol/12.8kWh battery that's good for around 50km of EV driving, is $64,990.

The model tested here is the performance flagship VZx, at $65,790. It uses the drivetrain from the Golf R/Tiguan R, with the EA888 2.0-litre turbo tuned for 228kW and 400Nm.

As a new brand that needs to work hard to hook customers, Cupra is sweetening the deal, on all its models, until the end of the year with the first three services included in the purchase price.

Formentor is slightly smaller than a Toyota RAV, and a lot less practical.

The sleek design and sloping roofline compromise luggage space. The cargo hold is small by class standards, even though the high boot floor hides a small inflator kit rather than a bulky full-size spare tyre.

However, there is sufficient headroom and knee room front and rear in the main cabin — which delivers a fair level of comfort — though it is probably suited to four occupants rather than five.

The interior has upmarket materials and a clutter-free design, but Cupra (as with some other brands) has probably gone a step too far and taken away too many buttons and dials.

The functionality of the infotainment screen is a shemozzle, and it's not easy to operate on the move, especially at night.

Embedded navigation — as well as wired and wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto — and FM/digital radio are part of the package, but AM is not.

There is a wireless charging pad for smartphones, and four USB-C fast-charging ports (two front, two rear).

While some Cupra petrol models can run on 95-octane premium, the Formentor VZx commands 98-octane. The fuel rating label shows an average consumption of 7.7L/100km, but on test, VZx returned 8.5L/100km — thirstier than expected.

There are quiet and loud modes for the exhaust, however, even loud mode is muted thanks to strict emissions regulations in Europe.

Because it is so quiet (for a performance car) the Formentor VZx is deceptively quick.

In launch mode it repeatedly clocked 0-100km/h in 4.8 seconds, undercutting the official claim of 4.9 seconds, and matching VW's Golf R.

Braking was also impressive, while cornering grip and steering precision are profound. The suspension is busy at times, but relatively comfortable and not bone-jarring.

This is what happens when chassis engineers have had years to become familiar with a platform — in this case the VW Golf — and are able to make constant improvements.

Indeed, infotainment frustrations aside, the Cupra Formentor VZx not only bridges the gap between SUV and hot hatch, it blurs the lines. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Looks fast even when it's standing still
- ✔ Performance to match, too
- ✔ Precise steering and taut, agile handling
- ✔ Excellent grip and stopping power
- ✔ Pretty good bang for bucks appeal

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Infotainment and air con controls very difficult to use
- ✘ Cabin isn't exactly spacious
- ✘ Seven-speed transmission can be slow to engage from rest
- ✘ A new brand, so resale values are yet to be established

SPEX (VZx)

- Made in Spain
- 2.0-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/seven-speed DSG/all-wheel drive
- 228kW of power from 5450-6500rpm/400Nm of torque from 2000-5450rpm
- 0-100km/h in 4.8 seconds
- 6.5L/100km highway; 9.6L/100km city; 98 premium; CO2 emissions are 175g/km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Ten airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, door exit warning, wireless and wired Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, navigation, wireless phone charging, Beats audio, sports seats, leather upholstery, hands free power tailgate, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 53%; 5yr: 37%

compare with ...

Volkswagen T-Roc, Mazda CX-30, Hyundai Kona N, Kia Seltos GT-Line, BMW X2

DEEPAL **S07** FROM **$53,900**

Deepal is one of the many Chinese brands looking to expand its global footprint, and Australia is high on the hit list.

The brand is part of state-owned Changan Automobile and is being imported locally by Inchcape, which also looks after Subaru and Peugeot.

As of early 2025 there were only a handful of dealerships in Sydney and Melbourne, so sampling one is a challenge. There are plans to expand the network as sales grow.

The S07 arrives with a one-size-fits-all sales pitch with a price tag of $53,900 before on-road costs.

Standard gear includes 19-inch alloys, synthetic leather, dual-zone ventilation, a powered tailgate, 360-degree camera, tyre pressure sensors, wireless phone charger, heated steering wheel, heated and ventilated front seats, electrically adjustable front seats with memory function for the driver, panoramic sunroof with retractable cover and a 14-speaker Sony sound system.

There's also an augmented reality head-up display and 15.6-inch central infotainment screen.

Active safety systems include auto braking in forward and reverse, blind spot warning, exit warning, speed sign recognition and lane keep assist.

There's a seven-year, 160,000km warranty, although that drops to just one year and 120,000km if you use the car for commercial purposes (Uber drivers beware!). There's a separate eight-year, 240,000km warranty on the high voltage battery.

The S07 is larger than many mid-sized SUVs and its dedicated EV architecture means it maximises the millimetres in the cabin. There's loads of space front and rear. A floating centre console not only provides storage beneath but also a deep covered area with a split opening arm rest.

The boot is broad and has a 60/40 split-folding back seat. Plus there's a decent under storage binnacle.

Imitation quilted leather is convincing and the start of a long list of upmarket finishes that include wood-look inserts, metallic highlights and appealing plastics.

Attention to detail is good, too, from touch operated map lights to the cooled wireless phone charger. Those in the rear can also control the roof blind as well as the rear AC temp.

There's no shortage of Tesla thinking, from the lack of a start button to adjusting the mirrors and air flow through the screen. Thankfully driver profiles allow you to adjust for regular drivers.

The main screen is also crisp and vibrant and the 360-degree camera with various views — including a virtual view that allows you to see what's under the car — makes manoeuvring easier.

There's a Tesla-like vibe to some of the menus and functionality and you can pre-program favourites buttons along the bottom of the screen.

Delving into menus to adjust the ventilation can get tiring and once the AC kicks in it's not particularly icy.

The driver assist systems can also get infuriating, with up to 21 beeps if it decides you're not concentrating and more beeps and warnings when you get near the edge of a lane.

It can be turned off, but you have to do it every time you get behind the wheel. Thankfully Deepal has promised a software update to address the issue.

The S07 is comfortable but not particularly athletic and is prone to fidgeting and squirming in bumpy bends.

By EV standards the Deepal is nothing special in terms of performance. There's 160kW and 320Nm from its single electric motor driving the rear wheels.

It's leisurely by EV standards but fine around town with an easy-to-access surge of torque that makes it easy to build pace. And compared with most petrol-powered SUV alternatives for similar money it'll be more responsive.

There's also a big battery — with a capacity of 79.97kWh — which endows it with a generous 475km of claimed range; expect closer to 420km in the real world.

Home charging can be done in as little as eight hours with a three-phase wallbox, but DC charging is limited to 92kW, limiting its usefulness on bigger road trips.

The S07's drawcard is its upmarket flavour and bulging equipment list.

The driving experience is less endearing and we'd want to experience the promised recalibration of the driving aids before shortlisting this newcomer. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★⯪☆
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Packed with equipment
- ✔ Spacious and functional cabin
- ✔ Upmarket cabin is brimming with classy finishes
- ✔ Modest performance but easy to access

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Driver warnings beep and bong waaaaay too much
- ✘ Air-conditioning isn't very icy
- ✘ Charging speeds not great which limits road trip usefulness
- ✘ Needs better suspension control

SPEX (Deepal S07)

- Made in China
- Single electric motor/79.97kWh battery/single-speed automatic/rear-wheel drive
- 160kW of power/320Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.9 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 475km
- Warranty: Seven years/160,000km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, panoramic sunroof, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 45%

compare with ...

Hyundai Kona Electric, Tesla Model Y, BYD Sealion 7

FORD **EVEREST** FROM **$54,240**

The Ford Everest — the family freighter wagon version of the new Ranger ute — kicks off at $54,240 for the Ambiente, which gets a 154kW/500Nm 2.0-litre twin-turbo four-cylinder diesel matched to a 10-speed automatic and seating for five. Standard equipment includes smart key entry, wireless phone charging, wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. There's also an onboard modem that connects to a smartphone app to provide basic info and remote start functionality, while a dual range 4x4 drivetrain adds $5000.

The 4x4 drivetrain alone if fitted to the Trend, priced at $66,790, which also adds a third row of seats, leather, powered tailgate and 18-inch alloy wheels in lieu of seventeens.

Sport 2.0-litre RWD is $63,740, and then steps up big time to a 184kW/600Nm 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel and 10-speed auto driving all four wheels (with dual range 4x4), priced from $74,640. It picks up black design highlights, heating and cooling for the seats and 20-inch wheels.

Sitting above Sport is the new-for-2025 Tremor. At $76,590 it comes exclusively with the V6 and raised off-road suspension, wider 17 x 8.0-inch alloy wheels fitted with all-terrain tyres, underbody bash plate and additional 'rock crawl' drive mode.

The top-of-the-range Platinum ($81,200) 3.0-litre V6 is loaded, with a sunroof, matrix LED headlights, middle row seat heating, larger digital instrument cluster, Bang & Olufsen audio and 21-inch wheels; as with Sport and Wildtrak, they can be swapped at no cost for 18-inch wheels, designed to go off-road.

All models have a quality interior presentation, Trend and above more so courtesy of a sizeable 12-inch centre screen and snazzier finishes.

The middle row seat is not as spacious as some — including the Toyota Prado, the Ford's prime rival — but it accommodates three kids easily. The third row has child seat anchor points (rare in three-row SUVs) but is tight for head and leg room.

No qualms with comfort, though. The Everest is among the quietest and most refined off-road wagons at its price point, something that makes for relaxed touring.

There's no hiding circa-2.3 tonnes, although the Everest's dynamics are tidy and well controlled. Steering is predictable and the suspension is up to absorbing big hits while recovering swiftly.

The Everest is also highly accomplished off-road, with excellent ground clearance and wheel articulation. A rear differential lock maximises traction in slippery situations while selectable drive modes on Sport and Platinum adjust gear shifts and throttle response to the conditions.

Sharing much of its underbody with the Ranger ute, the Everest now has the same tow capacity of 3.5 tonnes. However at GVM of 3150kg, the maximum legal trailer weight for V6 models is 3100kg.

Either engine is well suited to towing, but the V6, with effortless bottom end grunt, will haul a heavy trailer (say, 2.5 tonnes-plus) more easily. There's a Tow/Haul drive mode to optimise gear shifts and engine braking when towing, plus a built in trailer brake controller and blind spot monitoring that accounts for the extra length of your trailer.

Ford's latest Everest is arguably now the pick of the heavy duty 4x4 wagons, and great value.

You can get into a top spec 3.0-litre V6 Platinum, for example, for about $15,000 less than a base model 300 Series Toyota Landcruiser, and about $20,000 less than a Nissan Patrol Ti-L. As such, it mounts a compelling case as a tow and rough road machine that also nails family duties. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Smooth, grunt-laden 3.0-litre V6
- ✔ Excellent value compared with Toyota rivals
- ✔ Up to the minute safety and infotainment tech
- ✔ Generous equipment levels
- ✔ Confident, secure handling on and off road
- ✔ Useful towing tech aids

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Reliability is yet to be proven
- ✘ Rear seat space not as generous as Prado
- ✘ It's still a big, heavy 4x4, so it doesn't handle like a good car or SUV.
- ✘ The big infotainment touchscreen is difficult and distracting to use

SPEX (Sport)

- Made in Thailand
- 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel/10-speed automatic/dual range 4x4
- 184kW of power at 3250rpm/600Nm of torque from 1750-2250rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 7.6L/100km highway; 10.2L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 224gkm; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, rear cross traffic alert and braking, lane keep assist, surround camera, digital instruments, 12-inch portrait touchscreen infotainment, wireless phone charging, navigation, voice control, leather upholstery, heated and cooled front seats, power tailgate, dual zone air, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 74%; 5yr: 57%

compare with ...

Toyota Prado and 300 Landcruiser, Land Rover Discovery, Isuzu MU-X, Mitsubishi Pajero Sport

FORD **RANGER** FROM **$50,880**

Ford's 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel Ranger raised the ute bar when it arrived in 2022.

Ranger double cab, dual range 4x4 ute prices kick off at $50,880 for the 125kW/405Nm 2.0-litre turbodiesel/six-speed auto XL.

The 150kW/500Nm 2.0-litre four-cylinder twin turbodiesel/10-speed automatic XL is $54,380.

Other models with this drivetrain include XLS at $57,630, XLT at $63,640, Sport at $66,140, Wildtrak at $69,640 and Wildtrak X at $77,640.

The 184kW/600Nm 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel, also with the 10-speed auto, starts at $68,840 in XLT specification; Sport is $71,340, Wildtrak is $74,840 and Platinum is $80,640.

The 2.0-litre twin turbodiesel is a sweet engine, with good fuel economy and deceptively strong pulling power. However the 3.0-litre V6's 100Nm of added grunt is worth its extra asking price, especially if you're going to tow on a regular basis.

An extra two cylinders simply does the job in a much more effortless manner, and although it doesn't feel like there's 184kW of power underfoot when you plant it, acceleration is respectable enough.

It's also remarkably quiet and smooth under light loads, only becoming faintly vocal under hard acceleration. On test, our best result on the highway was 8.2L/100km; in town, you're looking at 11-13L/100km, or a tad less if you can live with the auto stop/start.

The 10-speed is smooth and relatively seamless around town and on the highway, but it's four more ratios than the diesel really requires, especially in low range where it can be a bit erratic and slurred in operation. Surprisingly, there are no shift paddles.

The 3.0-litre V6 models get an on-demand 4WD drivetrain able to drive all four wheels on bitumen. The 2.0-litre models have a part time 4WD drivetrain. A rear diff lock is standard.

When it comes to on-road handling, the new Ranger is a huge improvement over its predecessor. Most utes get nervous and twitchy at the back-end on rough roads, especially unladen, but the Ranger stays planted, displaying excellent roadholding and body control.

The suspension also delivers a smooth, comfortable ride and the steering is more precise and tactile than the usual rubbery ute tiller. Discs all round are standard on V6 models, and braking is powerful and progressive.

Wildtrak gets a power operated sliding tub cover, and a handy sidestep on each back corner so you can get at your gear easily.

Ford has thrown a swag of useful tow tech into the Ranger, including a built-in brake controller, blind spot monitoring that accounts for the presence of trailers up to 10 metres long, a specific transmission/traction control/engine braking drivetrain map and a trailer light check function.

The instruments are easy to read and informative, but the big portrait-style SYNC 4 touchscreen infotainment needs a rethink. There's too much going on screen to quickly find what you want, it's too low on the dash, and the tap and swipe functionality is erratic.

In off-road mode, the screen can display the terrain ahead using surround cameras, with suggested track guidelines, plus roll, pitch and steering angles.

Front seats are comfortable and supportive, there's plenty of storage, USB A and C ports, wireless phone charging and Apple CarPlay/Android Auto. Navigation and voice control are also included, plus the Ford Pass App, which accesses a vehicle locator, remote start, lock and unlock functions.

Wildtrak also get Bang and Olufsen sound, leather, and heated front seats.

The back seat is OK, but adults sit bolt upright with no backrest adjustability and limited legroom.

The Ranger is the best one-tonner on the market.

From mid-2025, the 2.3-litre turbopetrol plug-in hybrid will reinforce Ranger's leadership.

It will be offered in XLT ($71,990), Sport ($75,990) Wildtrak ($79,990) and unique Stormtrack ($86,990) trim.

An electric-only range of up to 45km will surely appeal to tradies. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ V6 prices are reasonable given the performance and spec on offer.
- ✔ V6 does effortless grunt and is perfect for towing
- ✔ Quiet, comfortable and refined
- ✔ Wildtrak is loaded with gear
- ✔ Well controlled dynamics and secure roadholding
- ✔ Highly capable off road
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Big infotainment touchscreen is a mess and difficult to use safely
- ✘ Uncomfortable back seat
- ✘ Reliability is yet to be proven
- ✘ Wireless Android Auto didn't want to play in test car

SPEX (Wildtrak)

- Made in Thailand
- 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel/10-speed automatic/dual range in demand 4x4
- 184kW of power at 3250rpm/600Nm of torque from 1750/2250rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 7.5L/100km highway; 10.0L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 222gkm; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Max towing weight 3500kg
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, blind sport monitoring, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, rear cross traffic alert and braking, 360 degree cameras, digital instruments, 12 inch portrait infotainment touchscreen, navigation, wireless phone charging, voice control, heated front seats, leather, power shutter tub cover, 18 inch alloys, 255/65 Goodyear Wrangler all terrain tyres
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 81%; 5yr: 65%

compare with ...

Isuzu D-Max, Jeep Gladiator, Mazda BT50, Nissan Navara, Toyota HiLux, VW Amarok

FORD **RANGER RAPTOR** FROM **$90,440**

The Ford Ranger Raptor, priced at $90,440, has a twin turbo 3.0-litre V6 petrol engine backed by a 10-speed auto and permanent, dual range all-wheel-drive.

It's a significant upgrade. The V6's 292kW and 583Nm are almost double the power of the previous model's 2.0-litre turbodiesel four, while torque has increased by 16 percent.

Ford engineers claim the V6 Raptor is somewhere in the 5.5 to 6.0-seconds mark, and seat of the pant impressions say this is pretty accurate.

The previous model took 10-11 seconds to reach the speed limit.

Four-wheel disc brakes are an improvement from the previous front-disc/rear-drum set-up, but braking and grip on bitumen are compromised by very aggressive all-terrain tyres.

The bros who have bought a Raptor — or who want to buy one — have probably just thrown this magazine across the room in protest at this observation.

For the grown-ups still reading, it's worth noting the 285/70 17 BF Goodrich tyres are epic off-road, but they are also pretty dicey on wet bitumen.

Peak performance is achieved with 98-octane premium and a minimum of 95 is recommended.

Towing capacity is still capped at 2500kg — rather than the 3500kg maximum that applies to most of the Ranger line-up — because of Raptor's trick coil ring rear end and high-performance, adjustable Fox shocks that have been tuned for rock-jumping and off-road articulation rather than hauling heavy loads.

The 12.4-inch widescreen instrument cluster is a welcome inclusion (it's not available on other Ranger model grades as yet), the sports seats are super snug, and the gear shift levers behind the wheel feel solid.

The strip of red leather at the top dead centre of the steering wheels is a nod to centre lines used on rally cars. And the steering wheel itself feels like something out of a hot hatch.

Raptor comes with so-called "premium audio" and there are B&O symbols on the speaker grilles. But frankly the sound is muddy, lacks decent volume, bass or treble and is better suited to talkback than tunes.

Matrix headlights — which mask the traffic ahead so you don't dazzle other drivers — lack the super-bright beams delivered by other Matrix systems on luxury cars.

The infotainment touchscreen can be slow to keep pace with swipes, pinches and other touch controls.

So, what's it like to drive? Raptor delivers a new level of comfort and performance in the mid-size double-cab ute market. And that's just around town.

Off-road it has a level of grip and wheel articulation that few heavy duty four-wheel-drives can match. The longer and wider footprint — in addition to more advanced traction control systems, a completely revised suspension layout and adaptive dampers — have quite frankly elevated the Ford Ranger Raptor's capabilities to a new level.

It is also surprisingly refined for a workhorse-turned-hotrod truck.

On the highway, it cruises quietly and comfortably, and while you'll be lucky to get single figure economy, it will do 11-12L/100km if you're gentle. And while it's certainly not as nimble as a hot hatch, it is more taut and precise in its responses than other vehicles of this type.

Ford has clearly gone over and above in terms of the engineering capability of the Raptor, however technology such as the premium headlights, premium sound, and the top-end touchscreen don't quite meet the same standards. ■

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★½☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Rapid acceleration for a double-cab ute
- ✔ Loaded with safety and infotainment tech
- ✔ Super comfortable suspension on or off-road
- ✔ Strong resale values
- ✔ The best drive in the double cab ute class, especially off road

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Off road tyres have poor wet weather grip
- ✘ Muted engine and exhaust note
- ✘ Premium audio isn't
- ✘ Penny-pinching measures such as no extendable sun visors and no gas struts for the bonnet
- ✘ A bigger fuel tank would be useful

SPEX

- Made in Thailand
- 3.0-litre V6 turbopetrol/10-speed auto/dual range permanent 4x4
- 292kW of power at 5650rpm/583Nm of torque at 3500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 5.5-6.0 seconds (claimed)
- 10.0L/100km highway; 14.0L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 292gkm; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Max towing weight: 2500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, surround cameras, speed sign recognition, matrix LED headlights, digital instruments, wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, navigation, Bang and Olufsen sound, wireless phone charging, magnesium paddle shifters, sports seats, 17-inch alloys, full size spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 82%; 5yr: 67%

compare with ...

Jeep Gladiator Rubicon, RAM TRX, VW Amarok

FORD **F150** FROM **$106,950**

Like its RAM, Chevrolet and Toyota rivals, the Ford F150 super-sized US pickup is converted to right hand drive in a factory-supported facility in Melbourne.

All models are powered by a 298kW/678Nm, 3.5-litre twin turbopetrol V6, matched with a 10 speed automatic and part-time 4x4 drivetrain with a locking rear differential.

Short and long wheelbase double cab variants are available, the latter offering a two-metre long tub and an overall length of almost 6.2 metres. Try parking that — and believe me, I did — in an Australian-sized parking bay and you will have great difficulty if the neighbouring spots are occupied by other cars. And with the Australian Standard specifying a minimum length of 5.4 metres for a single garage, it won't fit in one of those, either.

Prices start at $106,950 for the short wheelbase XLT; the long wheelbase, tested here, is $107,945. XLT gets a very quaint column shift auto lever, small, dated touchscreen infotainment, cloth upholstery, 20-inch alloys and basic safety spec, with no adaptive cruise or 360 degree camera coverage — almost an essential on such a big truck.

Lariat specification, at $139,950 for the short wheelbase and $140,945 for the long, adds the extra safety tech, plus 12-inch digital instruments and infotainment screens, a centre console shift lever, leather, chrome alloys, Bang and Olufsen sound, wireless phone charging, sunroof, heated seats in both rows and cooled front seats.

Maximum towing capacity is 4500kg — one tonne more than smaller utes such as Ranger and HiLux. However payload is just 685-710kg, depending upon model, so if there's 10 percent of 4.5 tonnes on the towball, a full tank (136 litres) and a couple of big units in the cabin, that could be well north of legal GVM right there. With nothing in the tub.

Still, the 3.5-litre twin turbo V6 certainly has the grunt to pull a serious load. It's a sweet engine, smooth, more potent and tractable than many V8s and, without a load, surprisingly frugal. On an easy highway cruise, our test XLT returned a remarkable 9.5L/100km. The efficient, seamless 10 speed auto contributes here, with the 3.5 pulling just 1700rpm at 100km/h in top gear, as does are relatively light weight of 2471kg, due to a largely aluminium body.

A wheelbase of almost four metres tends to find its own way down the road, and on the move the F150 feels more stable and less tail happy on a rough surface than some smaller utes. A Ranger rack is fitted during the conversion, for more direct steering, the brakes are up to it and overall the F150 is an easy, predictable handler that belies its size and weight. The ride is compliant and well controlled.

All occupants enjoy expansive legroom and comfortable seating. There's plenty of extendable wheel reach and power-adjustable pedals to cater for different sized drivers, plus loads of cabin storage, including a huge centre console box, with a lid that double folds to make a handy laptop-sized work table, fold-up back seats and cavernous door bins.

The tailgate also has a drop-down step for easy tub access.

The F150 XLT is arguably the best value of the big American utes, starting at close to $35,000 less than the base RAM 1500DT, and boasting a more sophisticated, efficient drivetrain as well. Just be very careful when, and where, you park it. ■

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★½☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★½☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Good value
- ✔ 3.5 V6/10-speed drivetrain is best in class
- ✔ Tidy handling for such a big beast
- ✔ As roomy and comfortable as your loungeroom
- ✔ Lots of clever storage ideas
- ✔ Effortless towing
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ XLT is underdone for safety tech
- ✘ Low payload and GVM limits
- ✘ Small, dated infotainment system
- ✘ Dirty looks from other drivers

SPEX (XLT)

- Made in the USA, converted in Australia
- 3.5-litre V6 turbopetrol/10-speed automatic/part time 4x4
- 298kW of power at 6000rpm/678Nm of torque at 3100rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 10.0L/100km highway; 16.8L/100km city; regular unleaded; fuel tank is 136 litres
- Max towing weight: 4.5 tonnes
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, eight-inch touchscreen, wired Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, navigation, heated seats, ventilated front seats, dual zone air, 20-inch alloys, full size spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 71%; 5yr: 51%

compare with ...

Dodge RAM1500, Chevy Silverado, Toyota Tundra

GEELY **EX5** FROM **$40,990**

You might think of Geely as just another new Chinese brand touching down on our shores, but this one is a little different, given the auto giant's tendrils reached Australia many moons ago.

Volvo, for example, has been a Geely sub-brand since 2010. Polestar is one as well, as is Zeekr. Smart and Lotus are part-owned by the company, too. So a new Chinese brand, yes. But one with a stronger pedigree than most newcomers to Australia.

Anyway, the EX5 is first self-branded model to arrive from Geely — a mid-size, all-electric SUV that will play in the budget end of the EV spectrum, priced to take on models like the Leapmotor C10 and even the smaller BYD Atto 3.

It arrives in two trim levels — the entry-level Complete and top-spec Inspire — with prices at $40,990 and $44,990 respectively.

As is often the case with newcomer Chinese brands, both models are startlingly well-equipped for your investment, with the Complete opening proceedings with LED lights front and rear, 18-inch alloys, heated side mirrors and rain-sensing wipers.

Inside, there are heated seats up front, which are also powered and fully recline so you can relax when charging. Tech is handled by a sizeable 15.4-inch central touchscreen that pairs with a six-speaker stereo. One notable omission, though, is the absence of Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, but the brand assures that both will be made available via over-the-air software updates, the former in Q3 2025, and the latter in Q1 2026.

There's also a 10.2-inch screen for the driver, which means that all your key driving information, including the speedometer, is right in front of you, rather than off to the side as it is in some other EVs.

Stepping up to the flagship earns you bigger 19-inch alloy wheels and a powered boot, along with inbuilt navigation, cooling and massage functions for the front seats, a panoramic sunroof with a shade and a much better 16-speaker stereo.

Both share the same powertrain, which means a single motor at the front axle delivering 160kW and 320Nm. Those numbers translate to solid, but not exactly exhilarating performance. Both also share a 60.22kWh lithium iron phosphate (LFP) battery, delivering a claimed 430km of driving range in the Complete, and 410km in the heavier Inspire.

An EX5 weak spot is charging. While the Geely is good for up to 11kW of home AC charging, its 400V architecture allows for a DC rate of just 100kW, which means going from 20 to 80 per cent in just under half an hour, even plugged into the most powerful charger you can find.

On the road, the EX5 is more pedestrian than passionate, but it is comfortable, the ride is impressive over harsher road surfaces, the cabin noise is minimal, and the power delivery is steady and constant, and really suits the nature of this mild mid-size SUV.

The safety systems, of which there are many, are still mind-boggling in places, despite Geely's assurances that they've been tuned and tested in Australia, The driver attention monitor will squawk at you every time you take your eyes off the road, the overspeed warning will bing at you when you exceed the speed limit by the tiniest amount, and the ice-cream truck jingle played at slow speeds to warn pedestrians of your presence can be heard in the cabin. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★⯨☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯨☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯨☆
Value for money
★★★⯨☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Capacious interior
- ✔ V2L functionality
- ✔ Easy, unchallenging drive
- ✔ Comfortable ride
- ✔ Very sharp EV pricing

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Slow DC charging
- ✘ Fiddly, unresponsive central screen
- ✘ Overzealous safety systems
- ✘ Vanilla design and drive experience
- ✘ Geely servicing and dealer network yet to be confirmed

SPEX

- Made in China
- Single front-mounted electric motor, single-speed gearbox, FWD
- 160kW and 320Nm
- 60.22kWh battery, 15.8-16.6kWh/100km combined (highway and urban)
- Warranty TBA
- Standard: Seven airbags, AEB, Adaptive Cruise, Lane Keep Assist, Front and Rear Cross-Traffic Alert, heated front seats, 15.4-inch central touchscreen, 10.2-inch driver display screen.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 64%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

MG ZS EV, BYD Atto 3, Hyundai Kona Electric, Leapmotor C10, GWM Ora

GENESIS **GV70** FROM **$78,700**

Genesis is Hyundai's luxury brand, created in the same way, and for the same reasons, that Lexus was spawned in the early 1990s as Toyota's upper class moneymaker.

Straight from the Lexus textbook, Genesis is aiming to get its new GV70 mid-size SUV on buyers' radar with prices that undercut German rivals such as Audi's Q5 and BMW's X3 by thousands of dollars and include more generous luxe and tech, plus sweeteners such as five years servicing, valet pickup/delivery and a loan car. You also get more go for less money than anything else in the class.

The GV70 lineup opens at $78,700 plus on road costs for the 2.5T Advanced, tested here, with a 224kW/422Nm 2.5-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol that's good for 0-100km/h in a claimed 6.1 seconds. BMW's base X3, in comparison, is priced at $86,100, runs a 140kW/310Nm 2.0-litre turbo and takes 8.5 seconds.

An eight-speed automatic and all-wheel drive is standard, with rear-drive no longer offered.

The GV70 Signature AWD priced at $87,700 uses the same engine and outputs, as does the $89,700 2.5T Signature Sport AWD.

A 279kW/530Nm 3.5-litre twin turbo V6 is available in the $98,200 Signature that flings it to 100km/h in a claimed 5.1 seconds. BMW's X3 M50 xDrive, with a 280kW/500Nm 3.0-litre turbo straight six, takes 4.5 seconds and costs $128,900 — which works out at an extra $5117 per tenth of a second.

At the top of the GV70 lineup is the $125,858 Electrified all-wheel drive, with twin electric motors (one on each axle) producing 360kW/700Nm and launching it to 100km/h in just 4.2 seconds. A larger 84.4kWh battery now provides a potential 500km range.

Luxe touches in the 2.5T, usually absent in comparably-priced German rivals, include leather-faced upholstery and dash trim, full length sunroof, heated and ventilated front seats, hands-free power tailgate, rear window sunshades and rear seat air conditioning temperature controls.

Unfortunately, the enormous 14.5 inch touchscreen's size and position makes it a stretch to reach, and there's no standalone voice control, so you have to use the clumsy central rotary dial to find and select what you want, or connect your phone via wired Apple CarPlay/Android Auto.

Although the 2.5 turbo is a punchy, willing engine and there's much to like about big power up front and the rear wheels putting it to the road, the GV70 can feel unwieldy and heavy in tight corners, it's cause hampered by imprecise, uncommunicative steering. You have to be pushing it to induce serious misbehaviour, but the Audi Q5 quattro, Alfa Stelvio and Porsche Macan are better handlers.

It's also thirsty, especially in town.

If comfort, refinement and quality are priorities, though, the GV70 deserves attention and is among the class leaders. Its suspension (non-adjustable, with adaptive dampers only on the 3.5T) delivers an exceptionally smooth, well-controlled ride on poor road surfaces, the cabin is silent and spacious, the seating supportive and comfortable and materials, fit and finish quality superb.

When you put your money down on a new car, you also invest in the brand, and in dealer land there's always a greater perceived risk with new players.

As in the early days of Lexus, Genesis trade-in values are slightly weaker than most rivals. This will improve as Genesis finds more customers, which it deserves to do. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★⯪☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Big power and rear wheel drive
- ✔ More performance and equipment at lower prices than German rivals
- ✔ Superb build, fit and finish quality
- ✔ Smooth, supple ride
- ✔ Loaded with safety tech

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Feels heavy and ponderous in tight corners
- ✘ Imprecise, numb steering
- ✘ Touchscreen too far away to easily reach
- ✘ No wireless Apple Carplay or Android Auto
- ✘ Small boot

SPEX (2.5T)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.5-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/eight-speed auto/rear-wheel drive
- 224kW of power at 5800rpm/422Nm of torque from 1650-4000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.1 seconds (claimed)
- 7.4L/100km highway; 13.8L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 223gkm; fuel tank is 66 litres
- Max towing weight: 2200kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, adaptive cruise, surround camera, 14.5 inch touchscreen infotainment, wired Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, navigation, wireless phone charging, leather-faced upholstery, heated and ventilated front seats, hands-free power tailgate, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 78%; 5yr: 65%

compare with ...

BMW X3, Audi Q5, Mercedes-Benz GLC, Lexus NX, Volvo XC60

GMC **YUKON** FROM **$174,990**

DENALI
GMC
GMC YUKON DENALI

If you're the sort of person who spends a lot of time staring at big, heavy things — that boat you covet, horse floats, your house, the moon — then a new brand, already much loved in the US, GMC, has arrived Down Under with just the enormous SUV you're looking for.

And if you're also the kind of person who wants to pull up next to a RAM pick-up truck and tell him your vehicle can eat his for breakfast, at least in terms of towing, then you're going to love the GMC Yukon Denali.

The Yukon is a 2.7-tonne monster SUV built on a pick-up truck platform by General Motors, which is hugely popular with soccer moms, yokels and the American population in general.

Perhaps its most vital statistic — aside from its hefty $174,990 price — is that this GMC can legally tow more weight than a Toyota LandCruiser or Nissan Patrol, because it's officially rated at 3628kg. At the launch of the Yukon we were offered the chance to tow a 2.5-tonne horse float, which completed the task with ease, thanks to its very old school and properly hairy chested 6.2-litre V8 engine, which makes an impressive 313kW and 642Nm and has a powerful thirst.

Over two days of driving, mostly on open country roads, we averaged 14 litres per 100km (very close indeed to GMC's claimed fuel-economy figure of 14.7L100km), but while we were towing the float that jumped up to 22L/100km. Also expected suitably wallet-frightening fuel use in city traffic.

Speaking of which, we were asked to drive the giant GMC back into Sydney at the end of the launch program and it was a challenge akin to swimming with a dolphin in a hotel bath. Before we get to that, we should say that the Yukon Denali is properly spacious inside, with seating for eight, and it's a very comfortable experience from the rear seats, which get their own setback screens and Bluetooth headphones as standard.

Speaking of screens, those in the front seat get to look at a monstrous 16.8-inch touchscreen that dominates the cabin. The front seats are also comfortable and the ride is quite good, considering how basic the underpinnings of this massive machine are, but then you'd hope so when it's pushing $175K.

Throw it at some bends and the Yukon performs better than you might dare to expect for something so big, but if you ask it to change directions quickly you will certainly be made viscerally aware of the laws of physics.

On sweeping country roads, rather than tight twisty ones, it's a surprisingly pleasant drive and I could definitely see it being a comfortable, cruisy choice for a large family heading to the snow for a weekend.

At some point, however, you will have to drive it in the kinds of thin lanes found in Australian cities, lanes that were never designed to cope with something as large as this GMC, and at those moments you feel dangerously obese.

Several times, while driving on an inside Sydney lane with normal-sized utes next to me I was forced to breathe in sharply as I worried the edges of the Yukon would take them out. If you live on a farm, or spend most of your time on one, and will rarely if ever go into a city, this GMC might suit you, but if you're an inner city resident, please, for all of our sake, don't buy one of these.

Despite how enormous it is (5.3m long, more than 2m wide and almost 2m tall), the Yukon doesn't look too awful, at least from behind, and side on, but if you look at it straight in the face it has a chin that looks like it wants to fight you. Seeing one arrive in your rear-vision mirror would frighten most people.

But again, if you're after something very big to two very heavy things, and you've got a lot of money to spare, GMC would love to talk to you. Incredibly, the company reckons it has already had more than 2500 people who have expressed interest in buying one. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Effortless V8 torque
- ✔ Towing ability
- ✔ Interior space
- ✔ Ride quality
- ✔ Defies its size, at least on country roads

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Very, very expensive
- ✘ Too big for most Australian city streets and car parks
- ✘ Too big in general
- ✘ Not overly pretty

SPEX (GMC Yukon Denali)

- Price $174,990
- Built in United States and converted to right-hand drive in Melbourne, Australia
- 6.2-litre V8 petrol engine
- 313kW and 642Nm
- 14.L/100km
- Warranty three years/100,000 kilometres
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 75%; 5yr: 58%

compare with ...

Toyota LandCruiser, Nissan Patrol, Range Rover, BMW X7, Mercedes-Benz GLS

GWM **CANNON** FROM **$35,990**

The GWM Cannon is one of the most affordable utes on the market, even after a 2025 update that brought more power and more gear.

The 4x2 model is available in a single basic specification with just two seats and two doors for $35,990 drive-away. It's powered by a 120W/400Nm 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel mated to an eight-speed auto.

But it's the 4x4 models with a four-door dual-cab body we've focused on for this review.

They've stepped up to a 2.4-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel making 135kW and a more meaningful 480Nm, driving through a nine-speed auto.

Entry to that 4x4 range kicks off at $40,490 (all prices are drive-away) for the Lux that comes with a locking rear differential, imitation leather, smart key entry, wireless phone charger, rear parking sensors, tyre pressure monitors, 7-inch digital instrument cluster and a 12.3-inch central infotainment screen with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. There are also 18-inch alloy wheels with a full-size steel spare.

The Lux ($43,490) adds a sunroof, heated steering wheel, some real leather, front parking sensors, power-adjusted front seats, 360-degree camera and ambient lighting. There's also a step that folds out from the tailgate.

The Vanta ($45,490) picks up black exterior design highlights in lieu of chrome.

A more off-road focused XSR model gets all-terrain tyres, a snorkel, locking front differential and a part-time four-wheel drive system in lieu of the torque-on-demand permanent 4x4 system of other variants.

There's also auto braking, fatigue monitoring, speed sign recognition and adaptive cruise control.

However, the XSR misses out on rear cross traffic alert, blind spot monitoring and a door opening warning system fitted to other models.

One big win with the 2025 update is a half-tonne increase in tow capacity, which now matches market leaders at 3.5 tonnes. Towing that much drops the payload (up to 995kg) to 470kg.

Inside, a redesign has brought a fresher layout with the screen higher on the dash.

Finishes are fresh and thoroughly respectable given the asking price, plus there's decent space.

A trio of 12V accessories buttons is handy for controlling accessories such as lights or a fridge.

However, the infotainment screen can be frustrating. Every time you come to a stop the cameras come on (they're fairly low resolution, so the image is grainy). That means you can't operate anything on the screen. You also can't adjust the audio volume, even from the buttons on the steering wheel. Without a volume dial (really!?) your only option is to push the button to override the cameras then adjust whatever it is you want to adjust.

It's less than ideal.

The new 2.4-litre engine is gruntier for added thrust, but there's a delay waiting for the turbo to kick in. The engine is also tending towards noisy as it grumbles away.

But the permanent four-wheel drive system does a decent job of getting the power to the ground.

With a familiar ute layout of leaf springs at the rear and a ladder frame chassis it's got plenty of shake and shudder over bumps. The suspension is firm and not always well controlled, which does little for confidence.

A large turning circle makes for challenges around town. And some of the safety systems, including the lane assist tech, are also too eager to take over.

Still, it's difficult to ignore the value in the Cannon. There's plenty of ute for the money and it presents well.

And while it lacks driving finesse it delivers on many ute expectations. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ One of the cheapest utes on the market
✔ Generous level of standard gear
✔ Updated cabin looks fresher

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Clunky centre screen tries to pack too much in. Where's the volume dial!?!
✘ Firm and flustered ride
✘ Turbo lag from new engine
✘ Basis roadholding

SPEX (model here)

- Made in China
- 2.4-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel, 9-speed auto, four-wheel drive
- 135kW of power/480Nm of torque
- 10.1L/100m city, 7.5L/100km country, CO2 emissions are 221g/m, fuel tank is 78L
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, digital radio, partial leather, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 73%; 5yr: 58%

compare with ...

LDV T60, KGM Ssangyong Musso, Mahindra Pik-up, Ford Ranger, Toyota Hilux, Isuzu D-Max, Nissan Navara, Mitsubishi Triton, Volkswagen Amarok

GWM **CANNON ALPHA**
FROM **$51,990**

The GWM Cannon Alpha offers a larger alternative to the regular Cannon and provides a stepping stone between the off-road utes that Australians love and the new breed of gargantuan American pick-up trucks. At 5445mm long and 1991mm wide it's closer to regular utes than the Silverados, Rams and F-150s that consume a lot more bitumen.

Available only as a dual-cab four-wheel drive it comes with three engine choices: turbo diesel, regular hybrid and plug-in hybrid (PHEV).

All can tow 3.5 tonnes and have payloads of 685kg (for the PHEV), 735kg (hybrid) and up to 821kg (diesel).

Entry to the range kicks off with the Lux Turbo Diesel at $51,990 drive-away. It gets a 2.4-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel and (like all Alphas) a nine-speed auto. There's also no shortage of gear, including 18-inch alloys, a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster, dual-zone ventilation, power-adjustable driver's seat, 360-degree camera and the latest active safety systems, some of which are too eager to beep or temporarily take control. There's also a 12.3-inch infotainment screen with Android Auto and wireless Apple CarPlay.

The $57,990 Ultra adds a panoramic sunroof, partial leather trim, powered passenger seat, heated and ventilated front seats with built-in massagers, wireless phone charger and a 14.6-inch infotainment screen.

But no volume controls in the centre console is a frustration.

There's also an innovative split tailgate with two sections that fold out rather than down. It's an impressive engineering feat, also able to fold down like a regular tailgate.

The Alpha Ultra hybrid ($64,990 drive-away) adds a head-up display, heated steering wheel, ambient lighting, rear wireless charger, powered rear seats, heated and ventilated back seats, parking sensors front and rear and a 10-speaker Infinity sound system.

It get a 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo petrol engine matched to an electric motor to make a combined 255kW/648Nm. Despite being a hybrid, though, it's thirsty, with claimed average fuel use of 9.8L/100km (the diesel uses 8.9L/100km).

The PHEV is available as a Lux ($63,990) or Ultra ($68,990) and is the one for those looking to lower fuel bills. It gets the same basic hybrid system but with a 37.11kWh battery that can be charged externally and provide around 90km of EV range.

A 120kW/400Nm electric motor sandwiched between the engine and gearbox delivers the pulling power, although if you want proper ute performance – and a combined 300kW/750Nm – you'll have to wake the petrol engine.

Claimed fuel use is officially 1.7L/100km, but when running as a hybrid once the battery is depleted that claim surges to 7.9L/100km.

Electricity use is high by ute standards, but top up at home (paying 35c/kWh) and it should cost about $12 to go 100km.

Performance from the hybrids is solid but not what some may expect from the numbers. The PHEV is feistier and would leave Hiluxes and Rangers in its rear vision mirror.

There's also some inconsistencies with the way the hybrids work; sometimes you have ample thrust, other times it's momentarily undernourished and stumbling with the nine-speed auto.

The diesel has added gruffness and some temperamental lag when taking off but ultimately suits the character of the Alpha nicely, moreso when cruising.

In any variant there's stiffness to the suspension that makes its unladen ride occasionally testing, especially if the local council has been lax on road repairs. Even on a freeway cruise the body is prone to bouncing, although it's hardy and tough.

The Alpha is also deceptively capable off-road. There's good clearance and well calibrated traction systems and locking front and rear diffs on Ultra models.

Low range gearing primes it for more challenging situations, although in the hybrid it can require a good prod of the throttle to build torque to get over tough obstacles.

There's decent ground clearance and the Borg Warner four-wheel drive system does a good job of keeping the wheels moving in sticky situations.

All of which adds up to a ute unafraid of some tough love.

It also undercuts the big boys in the ute class and a lavish assortment of gear makes it a tantalising prospect, even if there are compromises on the driving front. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Sizeable body
✔ Sharp pricing and long list of standard gear
✔ Great off-road credentials
✔ Hybrid performance is stout

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ PHEV is frugal, but regular hybrid ain't
✘ No volume dial in the centre console (yes, it's frustrating!)
✘ Occasional mismatch of electric and petrol in hybrid models
✘ Road manners not as sharp as some

SPEX (Ultra PHEV)

- Made in China
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol, 120kW/400Nm electric motor, nine-speed auto, dual-range transfer case
- 300kW of power/750Nm of torque
- Claimed max EV range: 115km (expect about 90km); 1.7L/100km official fuel use; 7.9L/100km in hybrid mode; fuel tank is 75L
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: 7 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, door open warning, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, synthetic leather, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 68%; 5yr: 48%

compare with ...

BYD Shark 6, Ford Ranger, Toyota Hilux, Mazda BT-50, Nissan Navara, Mitsubishi Triton, Volkswagen Amarok, Ssangyong Musso, LDV T60

GWM **TANK 300** FROM **$46,990**

Tank is a new off-road focused brand housed within the GWM stable.

The mid-sized, five seater Tank 300 launched the brand in 2023, now joined by a larger seven-seater Tank 500.

The Tank 300 is priced from $46,990 drive away for the Lux, with a 162kW/380Nm 2.0-litre turbopetrol/eight-speed auto/dual range 4x4 drivetrain. Ultra specification is $50,990.

New for 2025 is a 135kW/480Nm 2.4 litre turbodiesel four-cylinder with a nine-speed automatic and 4x4. At $49,490 for the Lux and $53,490, the diesel brings 3000kg towing, up from 2500kg, increased 600kg payload and 7.8L/100km combined fuel economy, better than the Hybrid's 8.4L/100km.

Hybrid variants open at $55,990 drive-away for the Lux Hybrid, with 17-inch alloy wheels, sunroof, 12.3-inch digital instruments, 360-degree camera, Apple Car Play and Android Auto. There are also two USB ports in each row.

At $60,990, the Ultra Hybrid steps up to 18-inch wheels and adds wireless phone charging, Nappa leather seats with heating and cooling up front, a power adjustable driver's seat and a nine-speaker Infinity sound system.

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★⯪☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

There's also adaptive cruise control, autonomous braking, lane keep assist and speed sign recognition.

The Tank 300's 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol engine/electric motor/nine-speed automatic hybrid drivetrain is unusual in that the focus is on performance over fuel efficiency, with claimed average consumption a V8-like 10.3 litres per 100km. It's a thirsty beast, especially on the highway.

In the cabin, a central touchscreen provides a crisp 360-degree view and has logical menus. There's even an off-road display that highlights the various settings, tyre pressures and lean angles. Drive modes allow you to tailor the electronics to different conditions — including mud, snow, sand, stone or highway driving — albeit with a gimmicky tune that could get testing. The indicator sound, too, is an acquired taste.

Space up front is good and there's a deep covered centre binnacle and various other useful storage compartments.

The old school grab handle in front of the front passenger is a reminder of the Tank's rough road intentions.

Accommodation is less impressive in the rear, mainly because of the high floor that creates an uncomfortable knees-up seating position.

The boot, too, calls for modest packing, with a shallow, narrow load area. The rear door is hinged on the right side, and carries a full-size spare wheel.

Our brief drive, in the hybrid, was limited to the bush, but it was enough to learn that the Tank has the hardware to do pretty serious adventuring.

Selecting low range locks the centre differential. We found the traction control struggled to deal with a spinning wheel, but the rear locking diff quickly solves that. There's also a locking front diff.

In low range there's the occasional crack as the drive shafts bind up (similar to the GWM Ute) but this doesn't hamper its impressive off-road ability.

The 2.0-litre turbo engine makes 180kW and 350Nm, and once the 78kW/268Nm electric motor chimes in there's no shortage of thrust. The electric motor makes light work of the 2.3-tonne-plus Tank, and its easy, on tap torque is an asset off-road.

Soft suspension makes for decent articulation and underbody the vitals are well protected with steel bash plates.

At the asking prices, the Tank 300 is a lot of 4x4 for the money, but GWM's biggest challenge will be convincing people to give it a go. Australians are used to the reliability and durability of established Japanese brands that dominate in the bush, and the Tank is unproven on that front. ■

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Low starting price for a mid-size 4x4 wagon
- ✔ Chunky, olde worlde 4x4 design
- ✔ Electric motor's low-speed grunt
- ✔ Genuine off-road ability
- ✔ Cabin packed with tech and trinkets
- ✔ Seven years/unlimited km warranty

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Thirsty, especially for a hybrid
- ✘ In-cabin chimes and bongs may drive you insane
- ✘ Knees up in the back seat
- ✘ Durability and reliability untested as yet
- ✘ Soft suspension isn't quite right yet
- ✘ Predicted resale values aren't great

SPEX (Lux Hybrid)

- Made in China
- 2.0-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/electric hybrid/nine-speed automatic/4x4
- 180kW of power at 5500rpm/380Nm of torque from 1700-4000rpm (petrol engine)
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 10.6L/100km highway; 9.6L/100km city; 91 regular; CO2 emissions are 242gkm; fuel tank is 75 litres
- Max towing weight 2500kg
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Stability control, seven airbags, AEB, adative cruise, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition, rear cross traffic alert, 360 degree camera, digital instruments, 12.3-inch touchscreen, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, digital radio, sunroof, 17-inch alloys, full size spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 54%; 5yr: 36%

compare with ...

Isuzu MU-X, Jeep Wrangler, Toyota Fortuner, Ford Everest, Mitsubishi Pajero Sport

GWM **TANK 500** FROM **$66,490**

GWM has Toyota in its crosshairs with the Tank 500. The bluff-nosed seven-seat is longer but narrower than a LandCruiser but is chasing the same adventurous families to buy into its luxury-lined off-road talent.

And with pricing from $66,490 drive-away and a hybrid engine it also has the Toyota Prado and Ford Everest on its hit list.

Like that family-focused pair, the Tank 500 rides on a rugged ladder frame platform and has off-road hardware at its core, including a full-size spare wheel on its swing-out tailgate. A seven-year warranty adds peace of mind.

The Tank 500 is available in two models, starting with the Lux with 18-inch alloys, imitation leather, sunroof, heated front seats, powered driver's seat, 360-degree camera, 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster and a 14.6-inch central infotainment screen with Android Auto and wireless Apple CarPlay.

The Ultra ($73,990 drive-away) adds a panoramic sunroof, retracting side steps, head-up display, heated steering wheel, ambient lighting, noise cancelling, ventilation and massage functions for the front seats and a 12-speaker Infinity sound system. There's also some Nappa leather.

Beyond the lengthy list of equipment is a barrage of chrome, wood-look trim and quality materials designed to blitz the ambience of a Toyota or Ford. It works.

There's no shortage of space, either.

Up front there's a broad centre console with well laid out buttons, while another selection of buttons below the infotainment screen adds to the functionality.

Curiously there's no volume adjustment; only the driver can change that from the steering wheel.

The attention to detail flows aft and in the middle row there's great head and knee space; the seats slide and fold in a 60/40 configuration and the Ultra gets blinds on the back windows.

The middle occupant doesn't get the plush pews of those on either side, but the width of the cabin ensures wider girths are catered for.

Air flow is excellent, too, with separate ventilation controls in the rear, middle row central air vents and vents in the roof feeding to the second and third rows.

The third row is best left to the more flexible but it'll still accommodate adults, albeit with tight legroom and knees higher.

Under the bonnet the Tank 500 eschews the favoured diesel propulsion for a petrol engine. The addition of a turbocharger and electric motor makes up for the compact 2.0-litre capacity and delivers 255kW and 648Nm, better than most diesels.

The hybrid system is focused on performance over economy, with fuel use claimed at 8.5 litres per 100km.

The generous torque makes for easy acceleration of the chunky 2.6-tonne machine.

There's nice flexibility low in the rev range that makes for a hearty surge when burying the throttle.

While there's occasional inconsistencies to the way the petrol engine and electric motor meld, there's generally enough thrust to comfortably match pace with traffic and ensure effortless cruising. Call on everything and the engine revs freely to step up the pace, accelerating to 100km/h in a respectable 8.3 seconds.

There's a multitude of drive modes, from the familiar Sand, Mud, Rock and Snow through to Eco, Sport and Expert, the latter programmable to your liking, in turn adjusting steering, traction control and the transfer case settings.

Less impressive is the traction control that can occasionally — and noisily — chime in to contain the initial torque hit. It's at least effective and in tough terrain the diff locks further boost traction.

Riding on a ladder frame architecture also used under utes, the Tank 500 feels bulky and lethargic in corners, even if the steering is light.

Despite the luxury focus elsewhere it's not particularly plush, occasionally fumbling over big hits.

But it does fend off bumps and craggy roads confidently, forming the foundation of a car that does its best work in rougher terrain.

Off-road, the Tank 500 has the hardware to get down and dirty, starting with a low-range transfer case for slow-speed hill climbing and rock crawling.

There's 224mm of clearance and it can wade through 800mm of water. Metal underbody protection shields key components and the long travel suspension does its best to keep rubber in contact with the ground.

There's even a turn assist system similar to that in the LandCruiser 200-Series, which tightens the turning circle by allowing the inside rear wheel to temporarily skid when performing tight, low-speed turns off-road.

There's one area the Tank loses out to its rivals: reputation.

While time may well prove it has the stamina to deal with Aussie corrugations, red dust and mud, for now it's an unknown that some may not be prepared to risk.

But those who do will enjoy lashings of standard gear in a well presented off-roader that isn't afraid of rough roads. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Spacious body and upmarket finishes inside
- ✔ Lots of metal for the money
- ✔ Punchy hybrid drivetrain
- ✔ Terrific off-road ability

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It may be a hybrid, but it's a thirsty one
- ✘ Clumsy on-road manners
- ✘ Feels heavy to drive
- ✘ No volume controls in the centre console

SPEX (Ultra)

- Made in China
- Engine: 2.0-litre 4-cylinder turbopetrol hybrid
- 255kW of power, 648Nm of torque
- Claimed average fuel use is 8.5L/100km, CO2 emissions are 199g/km, fuel tank is 80L
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: 7 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 66%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Toyota LandCruiser, Toyota Prado, Ford Everest, Land Rover Defender

GWM **HAVAL H6GT** FROM **$44,990**

HAVAL
2BK5YO

The Haval H6 is GWM's mid-sized SUV to fight against everything from the Toyota RAV4 to the Honda CR-V.

The H6GT comes with a sleeker body style and more equipment as part of its premium sales pitch.

Whereas the regular H6 is priced from $33,990 drive-away, the H6GT kicks off at $44,990.

Plus, there's a plug-in hybrid EV (PHEV) version that costs $53,990.

Whereas the regular H6GT gets a 150kW/320Nm 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo driving the front wheels, the PHEV relies mostly on two electric motors driving all four wheels; the one on the front axle makes 130kW and the rear 135kW.

A 110kW/230Nm 1.5-litre turbo chimes in at higher speeds or to create electricity and takes the combined claimed outputs to 321kW and 762Nm.

Each comes packed with gear, including a panoramic sunroof, head-up display, 360-degree camera, ambient lighting, dual-zone ventilation and 19-inch alloy wheels shod in Michelin tyres. There's also a 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster and 12.3-inch central infotainment screen. That screen incorporates Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, but for both you need to plug a phone in, which makes the wireless phone charger less useful.

The front seats are electrically adjustable and have heating and ventilation. The seat trim is also leather-accented.

It's classy for the price point and teams with other cabin materials — including a carbon-like weave and metallic speaker grilles.

The battery is 35.43kWh, around half the size of a battery in many full EVs. Claimed range is 180km and it's easy to get 140km in the real world.

The plug-in hybrid system relies more on electrons than petrol and makes for a brisk unit.

Despite supercar-like claimed outputs, it never feels that muscular.

That may in part be because of how it works. Instead of a traditional gearbox there's a two-speed transmission that relies heavily on electricity below about 80km/h and makes the engine more prominent north of that.

Maybe at very high speeds some of that hefty torque may kick in, but we got no sense of anything like it in regular driving.

There are also various drive modes, but they can only be accessed via the touchscreen once you've left your phone mirroring screen. You can then either select the car icon then delve into the Driving menu and change the drive mode setting or — an easier option — swipe down from the top of the screen to unleash a menu of commonly used functions.

It's still a few more touches than is ideal.

It's indicative of an infotainment system that could do with work. If you want to adjust the fan speed or temperature you need to go back to the main menu or delve into menus. For commonly used functions it can get frustrating.

The H6GT can charge at 6.6kW using a home AC charger, which with a standard wallbox that means a full charge in less than seven hours. Plug into a standard powerpoint and you're looking at more like 18 hours.

Faster DC charging takes about an hour.

The official fuel figure according to the government test is 0.8 litres per 100km, which like all other PHEVs is a number you'll likely never achieve.

When running in EV mode you'll use no fuel and when running as a hybrid (when the battery is depleted, for example), GWM suggests you'll use about 5.4L/100km.

That's still decent and puts it in the mix with regular hybrids.

The H6GT isn't as slick through corners and in dealing with bumps as it is the way it scorches off the line.

It's riding on decent 19-inch Michelin tyres, but the suspension doesn't control wheel movement particularly well. Throw more bumps into the equation and it feels a tad uncoordinated as it tries to sort things out.

It naturally tempers any enthusiasm through bends.

Still, the H6GT PHEV adds to the booming depth in the PHEV market – and gives a viable in-between offering between regular hybrids and EVs. ▪

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Punchy hybrid system
- ✔ Great attention to detail inside
- ✔ Ability to drive it as an EV for daily duties
- ✔ Circa-140km real-world EV range

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ You still need to service it like a petrol car
- ✘ Driving manners a tad sloppy
- ✘ Infotainment system can be tricky to navigate

SPEX (H6GT PHEV)

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbo and two electric motors/two-speed auto/all-wheel drive
- 321kW of power/762Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 4.9 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max EV range: 180km
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, ambient lighting, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 52%

compare with ...

BYD Sealion 6, Mazda CX-5, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Toyota RAV4, Nissan X-Trail

GWM **HAVAL JOLION** FROM **$26,990**

Chinese car brands are rocketing up the sales charts in Australia buoyed by their attractive design and sharp drive-away prices. One of the most common questions we get asked is "Are they any good?"

The answer is not straightforward because not all Chinese cars are created equally. But as a sweeping generalisation, they still have some work to do.

The Haval brand is the SUV offshoot of GWM, which previously specialised in utes but has now applied the branding more broadly.

The Jolion is the brand's entrant in the booming small SUV class, where more than two dozen vehicles compete for attention.

There are six models in the Jolion range, all at drive-away prices. Models powered by a 110kW 1.5-litre four cylinder turbopetrol engine include the Premium ($26,990), Lux ($29,990), and Ultra ($33,990).

The 139kW 1.5-litre petrol/electric Premium hybrid is $32,990, Lux hybrid is $35,990 and Ultra hybrid is $38,990 drive-away.

Jolion hybrid's claimed average consumption is 5.0L/100km.

All models are covered by a seven-year/unlimited kilometre warranty and five years roadside assistance.

Premium comes with 17-inch alloy wheels, a 10.25-inch infotainment screen with Apple Car Play and Android Auto, autonomous emergency braking, seven airbags (including a centre airbag between the front seats), radar cruise control, speed-sign recognition, tyre pressure monitors, lane-keeping assistance, blind spot warning, rear cross-traffic alert, rear AEB, and a camera-based driver fatigue system (a pod pointed at you from the windscreen pillar alerts you if you're not paying attention to the road).

That's a whole lot of gear for less than $30,000.

The Jolion presents well and has strong showroom appeal. The long list of standard equipment is impressive.

But it's how these pieces come together that's the art form in modern motor vehicles.

Jolion's 1.5-litre turbo petrol engine is perky but thirsty by class standards, and the throttle response is too sensitive. It's difficult to drive smoothly at first.

The seven-speed twin clutch automatic transmission can hesitate off the line (a trait of this gearbox design, regardless of brand) and at times it slurs between gears and can be indecisive.

The suspension tends to porpoise after a series of bumps. In an attempt to give the Haval Jolion a smooth ride it has soft shock absorbers and springs. In this application they lack decent body control and so the Jolion can feel floaty at times.

The central control dial (rather than gear lever) takes some getting used to, but the interior has a clean and modern design.

Seats are comfortable front and rear, the size of the cargo hold is fair for the class, and visibility is good thanks to wide-view mirrors and a large window area.

All the ingredients are here for a solid vehicle. Haval just needs to send the Jolion to finishing school to iron out the wrinkles.

Haval endeavours to make the Jolion a compelling proposition at this price, but rivals such as the Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos and Nissan Juke can be had for similar money and, while not as well equipped, are from proven brands and better drives. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★½☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Stylish design, inside and out
- ✔ Loaded at the price
- ✔ Nippy performance
- ✔ Comfortable seats
- ✔ Long warranty and low service costs
- ✔ Well equipped with safety features

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Engine is thirsty
- ✘ Automatic transmission is slow and clunky
- ✘ Suspension is too soft
- ✘ Road holding needs improvement
- ✘ Some odd functionality in the infotainment system

SPEX (Premium)

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/ seven-speed dual clutch automatic/ front-wheel drive
- 110kW of power at 5600rpm/220Nm of torque from 2000-4400rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.7L/100km highway; 10.4L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO2 emissions are 186gkm
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km; five years roadside assist
- Standard: Seven airbags (including a centre airbag between the front seats), stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, speed-sign recognition, lane-keeping assistance, blind spot warning, rear cross-traffic alert, rear AEB, tyre pressure monitoring, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, 17-inch alloys, space saver spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 59%; 5yr: 51%

compare with ...

MG ZS, Chery Tiggo 4, Hyundai Venue, Kia Stonic, Mazda CX-3

HONDA **HRV** FROM **$34,900**

Honda's HRV e:HEV X (that's code for hybrid, in case you were wondering) costs $39,900 drive away.

A non-hybrid Vi X model, with a 1.5-litre petrol engine, is $34,900 drive away.

There's also a better equipped HRV e:HEV L at $42,900.

HRV's e:HEV system features a 1.5-litre petrol engine and two electric motors — one for drive, the other for generating electricity to keep the small-capacity lithium ion battery charged. You don't need to plug-in to recharge. A CVT transmission turns the front wheels.

HRV is a true series/parallel hybrid in that the battery alone can provide power — enough to get you out of your driveway, at least, or launch you a few metres from the lights on a gentle throttle — before the petrol engine kicks in and does most of the lifting thereafter. A surge of voltage adds extra oomph when you put your foot down. The car's software decides where from and how much motive power is required. You cannot select EV mode, because it would be pointless. The battery does not have the capacity to be the sole power source for extended driving.

Honda claims combined fuel consumption, on regular unleaded, of 4.3L/100km and carbon dioxide emissions of 98 grams per kilometre. That's according to the outdated and optimistic ADR 81/02 Australian standard; in Europe, where the more realistic WLTP test standard now applies, HRV's numbers are near enough to 25 percent higher at 5.4L/100km and 122gkm. You should be able to achieve 5-6L/100km.

Standard are nine-inch touchscreen infotainment with navigation and wireless Apple CarPlay, four USBs (two in the rear), 18-inch alloys and swivelling LED headlights.

The e:HEV L adds dual-zone climate control, rear air-vents, a leather-wrap steering wheel and powered tailgate.

This second generation HRV is new from the wheels up, and beneath its chunky Volvo-esque sheetmetal is a spacious, practical and very comfortable wagon.

It's not quick. The 0-100km/h trip takes a claimed 10.6 seconds, but performance obviously isn't the objective here and it's adequate for day-to-day driving. The Honda is also serenely quiet.

Suspension is set up for comfort rather than sporty handling, again in line with the overall design brief. The underdamped front end can get a touch loose on choppy surfaces at speed, and it leans hard on the outside front wheel in tight corners, but dynamics are generally secure and predictable and the ride is considerably more luxurious than most small SUVs.

A simple, analogue-era dash layout, comprehensive driver-assist safety tech, comfortable, supportive seating (for four) and plenty of legroom are complemented by an average-sized boot with a hands-free power tailgate that automatically closes as you walk away from the car. Honda's clever split rear bench "Magic Seats" fold flat for a cavernous extended cargo bay, or upright so you can carry tall objects.

Surprisingly, the HRV scored four rather than five stars in ANCAP crash tests.

The latest Honda HRV is not exactly a bargain, but it marks a return to the high quality, made in Japan benchmarks that earned the Honda brand premium status in the 1980s-1990s, before it dropped the ball in the Noughties. Honda's problem today is that rivals such as Mazda, Hyundai, Kia, Toyota and Subaru have now reached those standards, often at lower prices.

That said, the Honda's sophisticated hybrid tech is matched in the compact SUV class only by the Kia Niro and Toyota Corolla Cross. Others, such as Mazda's CX30 and Subaru's Crosstrek Hybrid, do not offer the same level of fuel efficiency or drivetrain electrification. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Refined, efficient hybrid drivetrain
- ✔ Comfortable seating
- ✔ Versatile cargo carrying
- ✔ Supple, quiet ride
- ✔ Only $199 per year to service for first five years
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Acceleration is leisurely
- ✘ Fixed, take it or leave it pricing is expensive
- ✘ Optimistic fuel consumption claim
- ✘ Seats four, not five

SPEX (e:HEV L)

- Made in Japan
- 1.5-litre petrol/electric hybrid/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 96kW of power from 4000-8000rpm/253Nm of torque from 0-3500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 10.6 seconds (claimed)
- 5.1L/100km highway; 2.9L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO2 emissions are 98gkm
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, adaptive speed limiter, rear cross traffic alert, Android Auto, wireless Apple CarPlay, navigation, digital radio, dual zone air, heated front seats, swivelling LED headlights, hands-free power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 64%; 5yr: 49%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-30, Hyundai Venue, Kia Stonic, Toyota Yaris Cross, Nissan Juke

HONDA **ZR-V** FROM **$37,900**

Slotting between the compact HR-V and mid-sized CR-V, the Honda ZR-V is targeting the sweet spot of the SUV market.

Priced from $37,900 drive-away for the VTi-X+ model, the five-seat ZR-V comes with 17-inch alloy wheels, dual-zone air, smart key entry and Android Auto/ wireless Apple CarPlay displayed on a 9-inch touchscreen.

There's also auto braking, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition and five years' access to the Honda Connect app, which allows you to monitor and lock the car remotely as well as activate the air-con.

The VTi-L+ ($43,400) adds 18-inch wheels, paddle shifters, tinted windows, heated front seats, powered tailgate and fake leather, while VTi-LX spec ($49,000) tops the lineup with partial leather trim, a wireless phone charger, heated rear seats, heated steering wheel, alloy pedals, 360-degree camera and a 12-speaker Bose sound system. It also gets blind spot warning and rear cross traffic alert — two things that really should be on all models — although there's no reverse auto braking if you are about to hit something. Or someone.

There's also an e:HEV hybrid LX for $54,900, which mostly shares its equipment with the VTi-LX.

The ZR-V is covered by an eight-year, unlimited kilometre warranty and needs to be serviced every 12 months or 10,000km.

Those wanting an all-wheel drive system will have to look elsewhere, because the ZR-V drives only the front wheels.

Powering those wheels is Honda's staple 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol engine. Its 131kW of power and 240Nm of torque work nicely in the relatively lightweight ZR-V.

Having that torque available low in the rev range helps here, as does the CVT automatic transmission that constantly adjusts the drive ratio to the conditions. It's a zippy and useful unit, especially around the suburbs.

Sport mode sharpens things further for more responsiveness, while claimed consumption of 7.2 litres per 100km (or 7.0/100km on the VTi-X) is certainly acceptable, especially as it's happy with regular unleaded.

The hybrid mates a 2.0-litre four-cylinder engine with an electric motor for a combined 135kW and 315Nm, the latter available more instantaneously due to the pull of an electric motor.

The ZR-V is stout and solid on the road, but with enough athleticism to make city driving enjoyable.

The suspension settles quickly and disposes of bumps assertively, adding to the ease of driving. Cabin noise levels are low, too.

While the ZR-V's body is slightly smaller than the CR-V, it's still generously proportioned.

Those up front are greeted with a well finished cabin that includes interesting textures for some of the plastics; the mesh strip integrating dash-mounted air vents is a highlight.

Easy to use dials and a logical menu for the touchscreen make it easy to access and adjust major functions while USB-A and USB-C ports keep gadgets topped up.

The Bose sound system on upper grades adds punch for those into their tunes.

Passengers in the rear get respectable legroom, although head space is compromised by the high-ish seat base. Fine for little ones, less accommodating of large adults. Air vents, dual USB ports and a fold-down arm rest complete the back seat package.

Boot space is healthy and there's a false floor for separating items.

While it's an average rather than inspired drive, the Honda ZR-V has plenty to offer if you're chasing a well-equipped, comfortable, good value SUV. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★⯪
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Beautifully built and finished
- ✔ The 1.5 turbopetrol has decent performance and needs only regular unleaded
- ✔ Sensible size and practical cabin
- ✔ Easy and comfortable to drive

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ No spare in the hybrid
- ✘ No all-wheel drive option available
- ✘ Pricey hybrid not as economical as rivals

SPEX (VTi-X)

- Made in Japan
- 1.5-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/ CVT/front wheel drive
- 131kW of power at 6000rpm/240Nm of torque from 1700-4500rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 5.8L/100km highway; 8.9L/100km city; 91 regular; CO2 emissions are 158gkm; fuel tank is 57 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: 11 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise with crawl control, lane keep assist, parking sensors, wired Android Auto, wireless Apple CarPlay, adaptive LED headlights, dual zone air, 9.0 inch infotainment touchscreen, 17-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 66%; 5yr: 46%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-30, Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Toyota Corolla Cross, Subaru Crosstrek

HONDA **CRV** FROM **$41,900**

Honda's sixth generation CRV, the largest to date, is available with five or seven seats, and front- or all-wheel drivetrains.

Start money is $41,900 drive away for the base VTi X+, powered by a carryover 1.5-litre turbopetrol four with a healthy 140kW of power and 240Nm of torque. A continuously variable automatic sends drive to the front wheels.

VTi-L is $49,300, or $51,800 with all-wheel drive. VTi LX with AWD is $57,500.

Seven-seaters include VTi X7, at $47,300 and VTi L7, at $53,500. In both, the third row folds into the boot floor.

The five-seater petrol/electric hybrid CRV, tested here, badged e:HEV RS, is priced at $59,900.

Don't bother negotiating, either, because prices are fixed.

The front-wheel drivetrain uses a 2.0-litre Atkinson cycle petrol engine supplying both motive power (at highway speeds) and electricity generation via a motor generator that keeps the small capacity (1.1kWh) battery charged and also acts as a starter motor. The battery, in turn, supplies power to a second electric motor/single-speed transmission unit that actually does most of the work, especially around town where the Honda usually runs as an EV, accompanied by regular, on demand engine startups to replenish the battery. When you need maximum grunt, such as climbing a steep hill, the engine and electric motor can operate in parallel.

There's a lot going on, but it's all quite seamless, and exceptionally smooth. Eco, Normal and Sport modes are available, and even in Eco acceleration is respectable. Sport mode sharpens throttle response and is pretty lively.

On the highway, expect around 6L/100km, on regular 91 octane. In town, though, where EV mode is the default and the engine isn't driving the wheels, you can get 4L/100km in Eco mode — less than half the consumption of the 1.5-litre turbopetrol equivalent.

Softly sprung and lightly damped, the Honda isn't a sporty handler, but it's poised, planted and largely untroubled by bumps on the open road.

The hybrid's body is strong and solid, variable ratio steering is direct and accurate, quality Michelin tyres are fitted, and the ride is supple and well-controlled.

Brakes are average, but extra regenerative braking can be had — to the point where you rarely need to apply the brakes themselves — by using paddles or the B position on the selector lever.

CRV hybrid's cabin is a Goldilocks space in terms of comfort, practicality, user friendliness and equipment.

Up front is a luxurious, supportive seat with ample driving position adjustment. All the driver assist safety tech and infotainment necessities are there, the touchscreen is uncluttered and easy to use and manual air con controls are provided. The hybrid also gets great Bose audio.

The 60/40 split elevated rear bench has lots of legroom, vents and a couple of USB C connectors. Two child restraint anchors (Isofix and Australian standard) are fitted. Each side has 190mm of adjustable travel.

Although there's a battery underneath, the boot floor is still quite low, easy to load and capable of swallowing a lot of gear. There's no spare, though, just a repair kit.

Honda's latest CRV should certainly be on your test drive list, especially if you have kids and are looking for an A grade family freighter. The hybrid is expensive, though, especially against Toyota's RAV4 hybrid which starts at $42,260, is available in nine variants and tops out at $58,360. Nissan's X-Trail e-Power is also available from $50,765 — almost $10,000 less than the Honda. ▪

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★½☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Smooth, efficient hybrid works well in town
- ✔ Comfortable, spacious, practical cabin
- ✔ Very comfortable ride
- ✔ Easy to use infotainment
- ✔ All the safety gear
- ✔ Honda quality and reliability
- ✔ Cheap servicing: $995 for five years/50,000km

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ The hybrid is expensive
- ✘ Fuel consumption equivalent to petrol rivals on the highway
- ✘ No spare
- ✘ Gets a bit nautical in tight corners

SPEX (Hybrid)

- Made in Thailand
- 2.0-litre series/parallel, petrol/electric hybrid/front-wheel drive
- 135kW of power/335Nm of torque (electric drive motor)
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 5.8L/100km highway; 4.9L/100km city; 91 octane; CO2 emissions are 125gkm
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: 11 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, 360 degree cameras, rear obstacle detection and braking, speed sign recognition, digital instruments, 9-inch touchscreen, navigation, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, wireless phone charging, partial leather upholstery, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 68%; 5yr: 51%

compare with ...

Toyota RAV4, Mazda CX-5, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Nissan X-Trail, Mitsunishi Outlander

HYUNDAI **IONIQ 5** FROM **$69,800**

Hyundai's Ioniq 5 mid-size electric SUV opens at $69,800 for the 125kW/350Nm rear-wheel drive base model, with a 58kWh battery that's good for a claimed 384km of range.

The Ioniq also comes with a 168kW/350Nm electric motor and a 77.4 kWh battery that's good for a claimed 507km. It's priced at $75,800.

Ioniq 5 Dynamiq with this drivetrain is priced at $80,800.

With a 74kW motor on the front, for a combined output of 239kW, plus a hefty 605Nm of torque, the AWD Dynamiq is $85,300. The all-wheel drive range is 454km.

Ioniq 5 Epiq costs $84,300 with rear-wheel drive or $88,800 with all-wheel drive.

At the top of the range, Ioniq 5 N, priced at $110,383, is a genuine high performance EV, with dual electric motors (one on each axle, for all-wheel drive) producing a combined 478kW/770Nm, sufficient to fling the N from rest to 100km/h in just 3.4 seconds. An 84kWh battery delivers a claimed 448km.

Ioniq 5 has V2L (Vehicle to Load) capability, whichcan power household appliances; it's handy for keeping the fridge cool in a blackout. Its 77.4kWh capacity is sufficient to power the average house for several days.

Ioniq's spacious, luxury lounge cabin is trimmed in high quality materials, many recycled, and its "future of motoring" theme includes an elegant, simple dash layout with identical wide screens for infotainment and instrumentation, loads of storage, and a minimum of button clutter. Boot space is reasonable, too.

Bose sound, a sunroof and partial leather upholstery are standard. You also get the full suite of driver assist safety tech, plus automatic parking, including keyfob-operated forward and reverse for tight spots.

Seating is comfortable and supportive, with power adjustable legroom in both rows, seat heating and (in the front) cooling.

Drive is engaged via a twistgrip on the right of the steering column. Modes include Eco, Normal and Sport. Performance is impressive. Lean on the accelerator and the Ioniq immediately lunges forward on a linear surge of high voltage torque. The 0-100km/h trip takes 5.1 seconds.

It's perfectly smooth, of course, and quiet. This makes Ioniq a relaxing long distance drive, however at a constant 110km/h on the freeway its range drops to around 300km. In town, you can achieve Hyundai's claimed figures.

Several levels of regenerative braking, adjusted via paddles on the wheel, keep the battery topped up when you release the accelerator. The iPedal function maximises current generation. Once mastered, you don't really need to use the brake pedal at all.

At 2.1 tonnes Ioniq is heavy for its size, but much of that weight (the battery) is under the floor, so although it feels tall from the driver's seat its centre of gravity is low, and it doesn't lean into corners like a typical SUV.

Add a rigid body, compliant, well-controlled suspension and wide, sticky Michelin Pilot Sport EV tyres, and you have a pretty tidy handler at speed. There is some kickback through the steering wheel on rough roads, though.

If you're keen to join the EV revolution, test drive the Ioniq 5, its twin under the skin, the Kia EV6, Tesla's Model Y, Polestar 2 and Subaru's Solterra. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★⯪
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★⯪
Comfort and refinement
★★★★⯪
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Beautiful design and high quality materials and build
- ✔ Muscular, refined performance
- ✔ Loaded with high tech and luxe
- ✔ Tidy handling and a comfortable ride
- ✔ How's the serenity?

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Expensive compared with a similarly specified petrol or diesel SUV
- ✘ Limited highway range
- ✘ No stand-alone voice control or wireless Apple CarPlay/Android Auto connectivity
- ✘ No spare, just a repair kit

SPEX (AWD)

- Made in South Korea
- Front and rear electric motors/77.4kWh battery/single reduction gear/all-wheel drive
- 239kW of power/605Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.1 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max. range: 454km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring (including visual), lane keeping, adaptive cruise, rear cross traffic alert and braking, safe exit assist, surround cameras, 12.3 inch instrument and infotainment screens, wireless phone charging, navigation, sunroof, automatic parking, Bose sound, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 57%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, Kia EV6, Ford Mustang Mach-E, Polestar 2, BYD Sealion 6, Xpeng G6

HYUNDAI **KONA** FROM **$32,500**

Hyundai's second generation Kona is a great improvement over its predecessor and is now one of the class leaders, joining Toyota's Corolla Cross, Nissan's Qashqai, Subaru's Crosstrek, VW's T-Roc and the Honda HRV at the premium end of the compact SUV field.

Kona prices open at $32,500, which gets you a carryover 110kW/180Nm 2.0-litre petrol/CVT/front wheel drivetrain; Premium specification is $39,500. The N-Line equipment option, which on the base model includes digital instruments, LED headlights and paddle shifters, adds $4000 to the base car and $3000 to the Premium.

Also carried over is Kona's 146kW/265Nm 1.6-litre turbopetrol engine, matched now with an eight-speed automatic and all-wheel drive, priced at $40,500 as an N-Line or $46,500 for the N-Line Premium.

Kona hybrid features a 104kW/265Nm 1.6-litre turbopetrol/electric hybrid/six-speed dual clutch/front wheel drivetrain, at $36,500 or $43,500 in Premium trim. It's a true hybrid and has a claimed average fuel consumption of 3.9L/100km.

The Kona is also available as an EV, which comes with a big price premium. The Standard Range (with 370km of EV range) is $54,000 or an Extended Range (505km) for another $4000 (that ER can also be had a Premium and N-Line for $68,000/$71,000).

Each gets a single electric motor driving the front wheels; the SR makes a modest 99kW and 255Nm while the ER ups that to 150kW/255Nm.

Kona's design follows the EV aesthetic, with sharp creases, squared off front and rear profiles and a clean, simple front end with no grille and sculpted LED lighting installation art.

Engineering-wise, it's stronger, lighter and bigger, easily able to accommodate long legged passengers in the back seat and with a larger boot as well. Kona also includes all the driver assist and crash protection safety kit you need in all models. Tech such as safe rear door exit warning, adaptive speed limiter and oncoming traffic collision avoidance is not usually found at the base Kona's low-$30K pricepoint.

So it's a surprise that the Kona scored four rather than five stars in ANCAP crash tests.

Also standard are remote starting, dual-zone air, digital radio, wireless phone charging or Hyundai's Bluelink in car connectivity, which enables voice control and other applications.

This generous spec, plus a stylish, minimalist dash layout, dominated by a 12.3-inch infotainment touchscreen, comfortable seating and excellent fit and finish quality makes the base Kona's cabin feel more expensive than it is.

Less impressive is audible warning overkill that at times threatens to become a distraction. It gives audible and visual warnings if you take your eyes off the road, but it can seemingly work at random. Lane keep assist is too interventionist and must be disabled every time you start the car, while adaptive cruise can be slow to react.

The 2.0-litre could use more bottom end torque but does the job OK, assisted by the CVT. Low speed ride is a touch terse for a base model, and dynamics, though competent, are compromised at higher speeds by torsion beam rear suspension, which can slightly unsettle the Kona in bumpy corners. It also detracts from steering precision, as the back end momentarily waits for the front to turn in. Kona 1.6-litre variants and EVs get independent rear suspension.

There's lots to like with the EV, too, including good pull when you first hit the throttle.

With Hyundai's quality, reliability and durability, plus good value, Kona is a good thing. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Great value at base model level
- ✔ Spacious cabin and comfortable seating
- ✔ Outstanding reliability and quality
- ✔ Loaded with safety tech
- ✔ Easy to use infotainment touchscreen
- ✔ Runs on 91

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ All those pings, bings and ding-a-lings might drive you insane
- ✘ Lane keeping is too sensitive
- ✘ Cruise control slow to resume
- ✘ Firm ride in town
- ✘ Four star ANCAP

SPEX (2.0-litre base model)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.0-litre four cylinder petrol/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 110kW of power at 6200rpm/180Nm of torque at 4500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 8.2 seconds (claimed)
- 5.5L/100km highway; 8.6L/100km city; 91 unleaded; CO2 emissions are 149gkm; fuel tank is 47 litres
- Max towing weight 1300kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, safe exit assist, 12.3-inch infotainment touchscreen, wireless phone charging, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, dual zone air, 18-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 77%; 5yr: 63%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-30, Kia Seltos, Toyota C-HR, Chery Omoda 5, Toyota Corolla Cross

HYUNDAI **SANTA FE** FROM **$53,000**

The new Hyundai Santa Fe marks a radical change design-wise for the large SUV. Gone are the generic curves and in is a new American-inspired boxiness that helps the family wagon stand out on the school run.

Prices have edged up, the Santa Fe kicking off at $53,000 for the car simply known as Santa Fe. That model is front-drive and powered by a 2.5-litre four-cylinder turbo engine making 206kW and 422Nm. A diesel is no longer available.

It gets seven seats, 20-inch alloy wheels (with a matching full-size spare), dual 12.3-inch displays, wireless phone charger, smart key entry with remote start functionality, 360-degree camera, powered tailgate, power-adjustable driver's seat and dual-zone ventilation with a fan controller for the third row.

You can also get an all-wheel drive ($56,000) or hybrid model ($57,000 for front-drive, $60,000 for AWD), the latter using a 1.6-litre four-cylinder turbo paired with an electric motor to make 172kW/367Nm and drop claimed average fuel use from 9.3L/100km to 5.6L/100km (the difference is more dramatic around town).

A mid-grade Elite costs $62,500 as a petrol or $66,500 as a hybrid, both AWD. It also throws in partial leather trim, ambient lighting, heated steering wheel, power-adjustable front passenger seat, satellite-navigation, stainless steel scuff plates on the doors and a 12-speaker Bose sound system.

Topping the range is a new Calligraphy model at $72,500 with petrol-only power or $76,500 as a hybrid. It gets unique alloy wheels, memory functions for the driver's seat, black exterior design highlights with black badging, head-up display, Nappa leather, sunroof, ventilated front seats, heated outboard second row seats and a digital centre rear vision mirror.

On the outside, the Calligraphy also gets folding handles on the C-pillar designed to make it easier to access anything fitted to the optional roof racks.

The Calligraphy can also have the middle row bench seat replaced with two captain's chairs for $500, in turn reducing seating capacity to six.

The 2024 Hyundai Santa Fe is bigger than ever, something that translates to more interior space.

And additional 45mm of length and 60mm of height translates to a big step up in headroom as well as a smidge more leg room in the second and third rows. It's a big car and attention to detail in the cabin is excellent.

Finishes are of a high quality, from the metal highlights and brushed aluminium in the base Santa Fe to lifting the ambience with matte wood touches on the Elite.

The broad floating console between the front seat occupants easily accommodates a couple of phones, while beneath is a sizeable pod that's perfect for small bags or odds and ends.

There's a five-star ANCAP rating and across the range there are 10 airbags, autonomous emergency braking, blind spot warning with steering assistance, driver monitoring, exit assist that can temporarily prevent the door from opening to reduce and rear cross traffic alert with auto braking.

The 2.5-litre four-cylinder turbo is muscly low in the rev range making for easy pulling power, but it's thirsty.

The hybrid is a better bet and worth the extra spend, something it will quickly pay back in fuel savings.

Paddles on the steering wheel adjust between four levels of regenerative braking; leave it off and it coasts, or you can progressively add more.

The hybrid is willing and refined. What it lacks in outright grunt compared with the diesel engine it essentially replaces it makes up for with smoothness.

There's ample thrust from the electric motor at lower speeds and the Santa Fe will often shut its petrol engine down to maximise efficiency.

Call on maximum performance at higher speeds and the engine needs to work harder, with associated revving adding to the noise, but it gets the job done.

The Santa Fe's suspension is taut but not uncomfortable with the associated control a nice trade-off.

Those low profile tyres are prone to some low-speed jiggling, particularly if the road surface has had a hard life.

The taller body leans when pushed into a corner, but there's always a sense of control and solidity.

Noise levels are nicely hushed, too, to create a comfortable cabin that easily devours big distances.

The Santa Fe hybrid can also tow, although its tow capacity as a hybrid is limited to 1650kg (2000kg for the 2.5).

The Santa Fe will sell to some on looks alone but also delivers on substance, making it one of the best seven-seaters on the market. ■

STARS ★★★★½

Safety
★★★★½
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★½
Quality and reliability
★★★★½
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★½
Overall
★★★★½

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Boldly designed body with matching interior
- ✔ Spacious and thoughtful cabin
- ✔ Loads of standard gear, even on the base car
- ✔ Full-size spare wheel
- ✔ Responsive and frugal hybrid system

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ A lot more expensive than the model it replaces
- ✘ Tow capacity of hybrid relatively low
- ✘ Ride on 20-inch wheels patters over sharp bumps

SPEX (Santa Fe Hybrid)

- Made in South Korea
- 1.6-litre four-cylinder and 47.7kW/264Nm electric motor, 6-speed auto
- 172kW of power/367Nm of torque
- 6.2L/100km city, 5.3L/100km highway, regular unleaded, CO2 emissions are 128g/km, fuel tank is 67L
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Ten airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, heated front seats, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 66%; 5yr: 52%

compare with ...

Kia Sorento, Toyota Kluger, Mitsubishi Outlander, Chery Tiggo 8, Mazda CX-80

HYUNDAI **PALISADE** FROM **$66,800**

Hyundai's Palisade is a monster-sized, US sourced, luxury SUV that's still a bargain compared with German brand seven or eight seater wagons, even though Hyundai has hiked the entry price by almost $11,000 over the past three years.

Prices now kick off at $66,800 for the 217kW 3.8-litre petrol/eight-speed automatic/front wheel drive Palisade Elite; the 147kW 2.2-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive is $70,800.

Calligraphy drivetrain variants are $75,900/$79,219 respectively, while Calligraphy Black Ink (seriously?...) costs $78,400/$81,719.

Eight seats, arranged in a 2-3-3 layout, are standard. A no cost option substitutes two individual middle row seats, with a walk through to the rear bench, for a seven seat layout.

Palisade is built to the highest quality standards, exceptionally spacious and comfortable, and loaded with equipment, especially at Calligraphy level where it rivals the big German wagons such as Audi's Q7, BMW's X7 and the Mercedes GLS — but gives you up to $50,000 change, better reliability and much lower servicing costs.

Palisade includes essential driver assist safety tech, a full size spare, leather upholstery, Infinity audio, wireless smartphone charging, wi fi hotspot and big touchscreen infotainment, with navigation, that's easy and intuitive to use.

Calligraphy adds surround cameras, including blind spot camera coverage on each side of the vehicle (displayed on the instrument panel when you indicate to change lanes) plus a power tailgate, Nappa leather, heated and cooled front and row two seats, rear door blinds and two sunroofs.

Curtain airbags extend to the third row and in Calligraphy you also get an audible alert if a side door is opened when a vehicle is approaching from the rear, but autonomous emergency braking only operates at speeds up to 70km/h.

Seating is luxurious up front and in the second row. The driving position is more recumbent and car-like than most SUVs, but you're still a long way off the ground so vision in all directions is fine.

All seats get roof mounted vents (three zone air is standard) and there are seven USB C connectors and 16 cupholders.

Accessing row three requires just the push of a button, and while it's more suitable for kids than adults, it's one of the bigger back stalls around. In eight seater mode, you still have a decent sized boot as well; with row three folded into the floor, the load space is enormous.

We tested the 2.2-litre turbodiesel, and while the petrol engine is plenty potent, Hyundai's latest turbodiesel is much better suited to shifting a heavy load, with lots of torque and fuel consumption that can be up to half that of its petrol counterpart. It's also exceptionally smooth and quiet, and a seamless fit with the push button eight speed automatic.

The diesel also runs all-wheel drive, which again is a better fit in a large, heavy SUV than front wheel drive, with superior safety and traction, especially in wet, slippery conditions.

Hyundai Australia tunes its vehicles' suspension for local roads, and Palisade's ride/handling compromise is superb for such a big wagon, as is steering feel and precision. Again, comparison with much more expensive German SUVs is valid, because the Hyundai drives every bit as capably, comfortably and confidently as any of them.

Highly recommended. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★⯪
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Outstanding value
- ✔ Refined, torquey, frugal turbodiesel
- ✔ Outstanding quality and reliability
- ✔ Luxurious, comfortable, spacious cabin
- ✔ Outstanding ride/handling compromise

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ The front grille is an acuiqred taste
- ✘ Bridgestone Duelers aren't the stickiest tyres around

SPEX (Calligraphy 2.2 diesel)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.2-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 147kW of power at 3800rpm/440Nm of torque from 1750-2750rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.2L/100km highway; 9.2L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 193gkm; fuel tank is 71 litres
- Max towing weight: 2200kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, rear cross traffic alert, surround cameras, head-up display, Nappa leather upholstery, navigation, Infinity audio, heated and cooled front and row two seats, dual sunroofs, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 65%; 5yr: 49%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-90, Toyota Kluger, Kia Sorento, Hyundai Santa Fe, Nissan Pathfinder

HYUNDAI **TUCSON** FROM **$39,100**

The Hyundai Tucson was updated in mid-2024 and starts from $39,100 before on-road costs and tops out at $61,100.

It brought minor styling changes including new front and rear bumpers, LED headlights and larger 18-inch alloys.

The biggest news for 2025 is a hybrid powertrain replacing diesel models, joining petrol models with both available on all three trim levels.

The base model is simply called Tucson, and then there is the Tucson Elite (from $46,100) and Tucson Premium (from $55,600, previously called Highlander).

An optional N-Line pack — which adds larger alloy wheels and upgraded interior appointments — is also available.

Petrol engines see the base model with a 115kW/192Nm 2.0-litre four-cylinder petrol engine matched to a six-speed automatic and front-wheel-drive.

The Elite offers the choice of the 2.0-litre or a 132kW/264Nm 1.6-litre turbopetrol and seven-speed twin clutch auto, both with all-wheel-drive.

Both petrol versions of the Hyundai Tucson run on on regular unleaded but the 1.6 turbo has shorter service intervals of 10,000km or 12 months.

The service intervals on 2.0-litre petrol engine variants are 15,000km or 12 months.

The Hybrid powertrain is the same across all three models, with a 1.6-litre turbopetrol and electric motor making a combined 172kW/264Nm.

It also runs on regular unleaded with claimed 5.3L/100km fuel economy for both front- and all-wheel drive hybrids.

The entry-level hybrid Tucson is $45,100, with the Elite front-wheel drive at $50,100.

Adding all-wheel drive pushes the Elite to $52,600, but is standard on the $59,600 Premium hybrid.

All models have twin 12.3-inch displays, and there push button controls (rather than a gear lever or dial) for the automatic.

The Premium also has a new head-up display projecting information into the driver's line of sight.

Hyundai has managed to combine a massive boot with a full-size spare tyre on all models, the hybrid adding an extra 43L over petrol versions.

Advanced safety tech is standard. Typical of Hyundai, Tucson's lane-keeping assistance is overly aggressive, but it can be disabled with a long press of a button on the steering wheel. In case you're distracted when stopped in traffic, the Tucson warns you if the car ahead has driven off.

All models come with wireless phone charging, which worked well during our test, despite a thick phone case.

Wireless connection to Hyundai and Kia Apple CarPlay systems has been hit and miss in our experience, so be sure to check the connection before leaving the dealership.

The base 2.0-litre petrol/front-wheel drive model, which we tested, is in many ways all the Hyundai Tucson you need.

It has a bigger footprint than the previous Santa Fe seven seater, which explains the generous rear seat room. As a five-seater only, the cargo hold is huge.

Extendable sunvisors are standard (to block side glare). There are also rear seat air vents and two USB charge ports so the kids can play with their devices.

On the move the Tucson is a smooth operator and the 2.0-litre engine works well with the auto, delivering refinement that's rare in this class.

Electric power steering is light and easy, and the suspension offers a supple ride.

The base model is equipped with Nexen tyres, which have acceptable grip in the dry but below average grip in the wet.

The 2.0-litre isn't particularly gutsy (0 to 100km/h in a leisurely 10.8 seconds is average to slightly below average for the class) but it didn't struggle when pointed at a decent hill.

The Hyundai Tucson has futuristic looks but is entirely conventional under the skin. Beneath the bold exterior is a comfortable, roomy and refined package, with Hyundai's outstanding quality and reliability. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Good value base model
- ✔ Hyundai quality and reliability
- ✔ Refinement, comfort, roominess
- ✔ Large boot
- ✔ Full size spare
- ✔ Smooth 2.0-litre drivetrain
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It ain't quick
- ✘ Nexen tyres lack wet weather grip
- ✘ Headlights aren't great
- ✘ A bit thirsty in town
- ✘ No speed sign recognition tech
- ✘ Wireless Apple CarPlay connection can be tricky

SPEX (base Tucson)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.0-litre four cylinder petrol/six-speed auto/front-wheel drive
- 115kW of power at 6200rpm/192Nm of torque at 4500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 10.8 seconds
- 6.5L/100km highway; 11.0L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO2 emissions are 184gkm; fuel tank is 54 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind zone warning, rear cross-traffic alert, lane-keeping assistance, tyre pressure monitoring, digital instruments, wireless phone charging and Apple CarPlay connectivity, Android Auto, 17-inch alloys, including spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 76%; 5yr: 64%

compare with ...

Toyota RAV4, Mazda CX-5, Kia Sportage, Nissan X-Trail, Haval H6GT, Mitsubishi Outlander

INEOS **GRENADIER** FROM **$104,000**

The Ineos Grenadier 4x4 was created when Sir Jim Ratcliffe, owner of British petro-chemicals giant Ineos (which part-owns the Mercedes-AMG F1 team) decided to build his own version of the old Land Rover Defender after it bit the dust in 2016.

Named after the London pub it was conceived in, the Grenadier is available as a wagon or dual cab ute. It's designed in the UK, uses BMW engines and is built in France.

After a $5000 tariff concession was granted for 2025 and passed on to customers, it's now priced from $104,000 plus on-road costs as a two-seat wagon or $105,000 as a five-seater.

For that you get a boxy, traditional Defender look-alike with a 12.3-inch touchscreen that incorporates the instrument cluster and Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity.

The Quartermaster ute starts at $105,000.

Equipment levels are basic — we're talking steel wheels and vinyl floors — and the Grenadier lacks many safety features, such as adaptive cruise and blind spot monitoring, now common in new vehicles.

As well as the base models there are Trialmaster (from $115,000) and Fieldmaster (also from $115,000) variants, each of which adds front and rear differential locks to the standard centre locking diff. Trialmaster keeps the base car's steel wheels and gets BF Goodrich off road rubber as well as a ladder and auxiliary battery. Fieldmaster gets bling, including alloy wheels and safari windows above the front occupants as well as leather, heated seats and carpet mats.

Ineos has also developed a range of accessories, some of which uses the exterior accessory 'belts' on the doors and luggage tie-down points. A snorkel bolts onto the air intake in front of the driver's door while there's pre-wiring for driving lights that makes mounting them a snip.

It's a climb up into the lofty cabin, where you slide an old fashioned key into the ignition, release an old fashioned lever for the handbrake and manually adjust the seats; the interior is designed to be hosed out, so there are fewer electrics. That's also one reason some of the controls are in the roof.

Ineos proudly boasts the Grenadier was designed primarily to go off-road. You don't have to drive far to experience the vague steering. It has a truck-like recirculating ball setup along with live axles that means big inputs to elicit a response. Plus the steering doesn't easily return to centre, so you're unwinding lock when exiting a bend. You'll be busy, even in a straight line.

Coil spring suspension nicely soaks up bumps and it brushes away big hits as though they're an inconvenience.

There's a choice of BMW in-line 3.0-litre six-cylinder turbocharged engines, petrol or diesel, both at the same price. The petrol is swifter and more free revving, the diesel gruntier and more fuel efficient. While neither is as refined as a BMW, an adaptive eight-speed automatic transmission from German company ZF is intuitive and smooth.

On rough tracks the Grenadier feels at home with a sense of durability. There's excellent ground clearance and steel underbody protection. With all three diffs locked the Grenadier has supreme traction on the toughest terrain.

It's impressively capable, although it's best to know the basics of off-roading because there are no adjustable traction control drive modes to help the mechanicals. There are also quirks with selecting low-range and locking the differentials.

If you're after a city-slicker SUV, then the Grenadier may disappoint with its tiresome steering and rugged DNA. But if you're looking to explore or take on serious off-road challenges then it's a worthy newcomer to the traditional, utilitarian 4x4 wagon playbook. ▪

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
On road ★★☆☆☆; off road ★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Functional utilitarian design
- ✔ Cleverly engineered to take accessories
- ✔ Brilliant off-road ability
- ✔ Compliant suspension also fends off big hits confidently
- ✔ Excellent BMW-sourced drivetrains

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Ponderous steering keeps you busy
- ✘ Heavy body
- ✘ Lacks driver assist safety tech
- ✘ Raised floor compromises comfort
- ✘ Fit and finish aren't great, and reliability is yet to be proven

SPEX (base diesel wagon)

- Made in France
- 3.0-litre in line six cylinder turbodiesel/eight-speed automatic/dual range 4x4
- 183kW of power at 3200-4200rpm/550Nm of torque from 1250-3000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 9.9 seconds (claimed)
- 9.0L/100km highway; 13.0L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 276gkm; fuel tank is 90 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, cruise control, digital instruments, navigation, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, digital radio, cloth/vinyl upholstery, 17-inch steel wheels, full size spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 55%

compare with ...

Ford Everest and Ranger, Jeep Wrangler, and Gladiator, Nissan Patrol, Toyota Landcruiser Prado

INEOS **GRENADIER QUARTERMASTER**
FROM **$105,000**

The Quartermaster is the ute version of the rugged Ineos Grenadier.

It broadly matches the wagon versions on pricing, kicking off at $105,000 for the basic model with a cab-chassis tray out back; add a few grand for versions fitted with the ute tub.

The Quartermaster is also available as a more off-road focused Trialmaster or a more luxurious (best to temper expectations) Fieldmaster, the latter two closer to $118,000.

It's old school in its design, which will keep the 4WD faithful happy. There are live axles front and rear and a ladder frame structure underneath.

Slide into the cabin and, like the Grenadier wagon, the Quartermaster has fighter jet-style overhead switches and dials and buttons that are ready for gloved hands and the bumps that keep things bouncing around when off the beaten track.

The front half is identical to the wagon, but another 30cm between the front and rear wheels accommodates the load space.

The rear seats — already tight-ish for legroom — are quite upright.

There's a Tesla-style central 12.3-inch screen that incorporates the instrument cluster on its right-hand edge, plus Android Auto and wireless Apple CarPlay.

And while there's no traditional navigation (the phone connectivity partially accounts for that) there is a system called Pathfinder, which allows you to record your off-road path.

It gives you an idea of the thinking behind the Quartermaster, which is very light-on for gear.

Sure, there's leather, but you'll be adjusting the seats manually. There's no dual-zone ventilation and now-common active safety features are missing altogether.

Instead you're paying for hardware, much of it designed to take you a long way off-road.

Beneath the skin is a choice of grunty 3.0-litre inline six-cylinder engines fed by either petrol or diesel.

They're supplied by BMW and hooked up to an intelligent eight-speed auto that plucks the right gear at the right time.

The diesel is more frugal and meatier in its middle rev range, the petrol zingier and thirstier and ultimately quicker if you're prepared to rev it. Most will opt for the diesel.

It's a rudimentary car on the road. Painfully slow steering means you'll be busy in the bends. U-turns are a chore thanks to a boat-like 14.5-metre turning circle.

For a tall off-roader it's lethargic and leans through corners, although it's ultimately well behaved in a big 4WD kind of way, quickly recovering from bumps. Big hits barely faze it.

On a freeway the frumpy sensation is less of an issue, but wind rustling past the windscreen is an accompaniment at speed. There's some firmness to the suspension that jiggles at low speeds.

Roll on to gravel and the Quartermaster rises to the rough road challenge. It's a car that's more about soaking up the scenery and getting out of the suburbs.

It shudders over washouts or potholes but does it in a graceful and well controlled manner. You get the impression it'll shun big hit after big hit for years to come.

As roads turn to tracks - or sand and mud - the available triple locking differentials and long suspension travel ensures forward progress is effortless.

It's remarkably capable, albeit laced with unnecessary quirks in how to activate some of its off-road systems (there's a specific order to engage the diff locks and no help from the car to ensure you get it right).

Like most utes the Quartermaster can tow 3.5 tonnes. And its payload of up to 907kg — 832kg for diesel variants and less for cars fitted with accessories, of which there are many — is in the hunt with Rangers and Hiluxes.

Few utes can lug their maximum weight and take a full load on board, but the Quartermaster can.

But if you want to load it up it may pay to relocate the spare wheel from the load area to the roof.

Whatever configuration you pick and whatever accessories you fit, make sure you head for the hills — or, better still, the outback — because that's where the Quartermaster does its best work.

The rougher the road, the more challenging the track, the more the Quartermaster seems at home.

Around town it's more of a chore. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★☆☆☆☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯪☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✓ Rugged utilitarian looks
- ✓ Wickedly capable off-road
- ✓ Lusty BMW engines

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✗ Six-figure price tag doesn't yield much gear
- ✗ Lacks the latest active safety gear
- ✗ Ponderous on-road with painfully slow steering and firm ride
- ✗ Huge turning circle makes suburban streets a chore

SPEX (Quartermaster Trialmaster pick-up)

- Made in France
- 3.0-litre inline six-cylinder turbo diesel
- 183kW of power/550Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in x.x seconds (claimed)
- Average fuel economy (a mix of city and country) is 10.5L/100km, CO2 emissions are 276g/km, fuel tank is 90L
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 66%; 5yr: 49%

compare with ...

Toyota LandCruiser 70-Series, Ford Ranger, Toyota Hilux, RAM 1500, Chevrolet Silverado, Ford F-150

ISUZU **D-MAX** FROM **$50,700**

The Isuzu D-Max (and its Mazda BT50 twin) is loaded to the hilt with tech, including lane-keeping, rear cross-traffic alert, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise control, speed sign recognition and a centre airbag between the front seats to cushion the impact between front occupants in a side-on crash. It's the first ute – and one of the first vehicles of any type in Australia – with this feature.

D-Max gets top marks for safety against the harshest ANCAP crash test criteria to date. A five-star rating issued today is a much bigger achievement than a five-star rating from a decade ago.

Last facelifted in early 2024, D-Max 3.0-litre turbodiesel 4x4 dual cab pickup prices start at $52,700 for the SX six-speed auto, with manual transmission dual-cab models dropped.

This sees the LS-M at $55,800, LS-U $62,500 and LS-U+ auto is $65,500; while the previous special edition X-Terrain is now the full-time flagship at $70,500.

D-Max SX is also available with a 110kW/350Nm 1.9-litre turbodiesel/six-speed auto, at $50,700.

The LS-M could be the sweet spot for many buyers on a budget or anyone looking to do a long haul caravan trip. The LS-M has bi-LED headlights and alloy wheels, but comes with all-terrain rather than highway tyres, and heavy duty rear suspension better suited to towing or carrying heavy loads. SX, LS-U and X-Terrain have softer "comfort" rear leaf springs. A rear diff lock is standard.

Electrically assisted steering is super light but you quickly get used to it and it makes easy work of tight car park manoeuvres, as does a small turning circle.

X-Terrain includes a roller shutter hard lid, a tub liner, leather seats, charcoal alloy wheels and extra body cladding. A tow hitch is standard, matching the equivalent grade Ford Ranger, Toyota HiLux and Nissan Navara.

It's worth noting that there are only two tie-down points on the X-Terrain (four on other models), an annoying oversight.

On the road the 140kW/450Nm 3.0-litre is a refined, tractable engine, with good fuel economy thanks to tall gearing, but in ute world the Ranger/Amarok's 3.0-litre V6 is still in a performance class of its own. Hilux also gives you more bang for your bucks with a 150kW/500Nm 2.8-litre.

Isuzu claims 3500kg towing capacity, but at GVM of 3100kg (including towball download) this falls to 2900kg, as the legal GCM is 6000kg.

Overly enthusiastic intervention of D-Max's lane-keeping and other safety systems can be very annoying until you mute them or learn to live with them.

When towing, the blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert are automatically disabled.

It's not supposed to be a race car, but even by ute standards the D-Max doesn't steer as well in tight turns or roundabouts as a VW Amarok or Ford Ranger. The front end wants to push wide and the tyres squeal prematurely. The Toyota HiLux on identical rubber didn't do the same, so there must be a difference in steering geometry. The brakes have a strong, reassuring feel.

There's not much to dislike about the new Isuzu D-Max. The infotainment lacks volume and tuning dials, the safety systems can be a bit intrusive and, while above average, it doesn't handle corners or bumps with quite the same class as a Ford Ranger or VW Amarok.

Isuzu diehards will love the D-Max. Just be sure to do your homework before signing on the dotted line. One tonner ute prices from most makers are becoming much more negotiable as supply improves and competition hots up. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Loaded with safety tech
- ✔ Comfortable driving position
- ✔ Refined, frugal 3.0-litre/six-speed auto drivetrain
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ You can buy more performance for similar money elsewhere
- ✘ Overly intrusive lane keep assist
- ✘ So so handling and ride
- ✘ No manual dials for volume or tuning

SPEX (LS-M auto)

- Made in Thailand
- 3.0-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/six-speed auto/dual range 4x4
- 140kW of power at 3600rpm/450Nm of torque from 1600-2600rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.9L/100km highway; 9.8L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 207gkm; fuel tank is 76 litres
- Claimed maximum towing: 3500kg
- Warranty: Six years/150,000km
- Standard: Stability control, seven airbags, AEB, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, rear cross traffic alert, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, seven-inch touchscreen, navigation, digital radio, bi-LED headlights, 17-inch alloy wheels
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 75%; 5yr: 63%

compare with ...

Mazda BT-50, Nissan Navara, Ford Ranger, Toyota HiLux, VW Amarok

ISUZU **MU-X** FROM **$48,400**

The Isuzu MU-X is between $1000 - $2000 more after a 2025 update..

As before, it's a seven seater wagon based on the D-Max ute. There are four model grades — LS-M, LS-U and LS-T — and a new X-Terrain flagship.

Prices start at $48,400 for the LS-M; LS-U is $57,400 and LS-T is $61,400. Four wheel drive adds $6000.

A 110kW/350Nm 1.9-litre four-cylinder turbodiesel added in 2024 continues as standard in the LS-M and as an option on the LS-U version.

The 140kW/450Nm 3.0-litre four cylinder turbodiesel is $2000 more in the LS-M and standard across the rest of the range.

Each is available with rear wheel drive or dual range four wheel drivetrains, paired to a six-speed automatic gearbox. Isuzu claims a maximum towing weight of 3500kg, but as with similar claims from other makers, this is a potentially dangerous example of smoke and mirrors.

If you put 3500 kg on the back of an MU-X LS-M 4x4 and you want to stay on the right side of legal, the maximum payload in the vehicle itself (including towball download, fuel, people, accessories and everything else) is just 330kg. Good luck with that.

The MU-X's unladen weight, or tare mass, is 2070kg. Is it safe to hitch up a trailer that's almost 1.5 tonnes heavier than the tow vehicle? Highly doubtful.

The new Isuzu MU-X is quieter and more refined than before, but these are relative terms. The previous one was pretty agricultural.

These body-on-frame, ute-based, heavy-duty four-wheel-drive wagons are not as car-like to drive as, say, a Toyota Kluger, Hyundai Santa Fe, or Kia Sorento, but nor are they supposed to be.

MU-X and its peers are off-roaders that have been tamed for city life. The extra comfort is appreciated, and the super-light electric power steering makes easy work of tight manoeuvres.

The engine is willing enough (though not particularly powerful) and well-matched to the six-speed auto.

We saw an average of 8.0L/100km to 10L/100km over 200km of inter-urban driving, dipping into the low eights on the freeway and climbing up to and beyond 10L/100km once in suburban traffic.

The brake pedal has a precise feel, but the emergency stopping distance from 100km/h on the 20-inch wheels with (relatively) low profile highway tyres was 42 metres. This is slightly below par among rivals.

Steering response is good for a 4x4 and MU-X feels reasonably well tied down in corners, though you're still bound by the laws of physics. A tall heavy vehicle with a lot of wheel travel, bouncy suspension and average tyres is not a sports car.

There are now only two Isofix child seat mounts across the second row (the previous model had three), but there are three top tethers, so you can fit an old-school kid seat in the middle position.

Air vents to all three rows is welcome, but there's no AC socket (standard in Ford Everest and Toyota Fortuner).

Advanced safety aids such as lane keep assist are quite intrusive. You can disable lane keep assist completely, that must be done after every ignition start. When towing, blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert are automatically disabled when connected to the factory trailer plug.

Overall, though, the latest Isuzu MU-X is a big step forward from its predecessor.

While the Toyota Fortuner is likely better off-road, the Ford Everest is better on-road, and Mitsubishi's Pajero Sport is better value, the Isuzu MU-X falls somewhere in the middle. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Loaded with safety tech
✔ Dependable engine and gearbox combination.
✔ Capable on and off road
✔ Spacious and comfortable.
✔ Good fuel economy
✔ Six years warranty
✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ 3500kg towing? Difficult to do legally and safely
✘ Lane-keeping tech is intrusive
✘ Mediocre on road handling
✘ Big price rises for this model, and expensive servicing

SPEX (LS-M 4x4)

- Made in Thailand
- 3.0-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/ six-speed auto/4x4
- 140kW of power at 3600rpm/450Nm of torque from 1600-2600rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 7.2L/100km highway; 10.3L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 220gkm; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/150,000km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, rear cross traffic alert, speed sign recognition, rear camera and parking sensors, LED headlights, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, digital radio, voice control, 17-inch alloy wheels, full size spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 64%

compare with ...

Ford Everest, Mitsubishi Pajero Sport, Toyota Fortuner

JAC **T9** FROM **$42,662**

Yet another newcomer brand, although JAC's specialty for decades has been trucks, including utes.

The Chinese manufacturer's T9 plays at the budget end of the ute market, priced from $42,662 for the dual-cab 4x4 Oasis model. It comes with 18-inch alloys, partial leather trim, power adjustable driver's seat, wireless phone charging, rear parking sensors, 7-inch digital instrument cluster and a 10.4-inch central infotainment screen with wired Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

There's also a long list of active safety gear that helped it achieve a five-star ANCAP result; included is auto braking in forward and reverse, lane keep assistance, blind spot warning, door open warning, rear cross traffic alert and driver attention monitoring.

The Haven model ($45,630) adds a powered passenger seat, heated front seats, 360-degree camera, tinted windows, front parking sensors, puddle lights that illuminate the JAC logo on the ground. There's also a 220V AC power outlet to power camping gear or household equipment.

It's familiar fare beneath the skin with a ladder frame architecture, live axle leaf sprung rear-end and diesel engine.

The T9's tow capacity is 3200kg, 300kg less than class leaders. But the payload is a solid 1045kg.

There's a tubliner for protection and four tie-down points to keep a load in place.

Inside there are five seats, although getting comfy in the driver's seat is tricky. There's no reach adjust to the steering, which makes getting snug and comfy a challenge.

And while it ticks lots of boxes on the equipment front, it's not as slick as class leaders when it comes to the finishes and attention to detail. Sure, there are some silver highlights, but they're very plasticky. In short, it looks and feels a tad more old school, especially against the shiny newcomers from China.

Behind the bold grille that proudly showcases the JAC branding — nothing like shouting it from the rooftops if no one knows your brand! — is a 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel that makes just 120kW and 410Nm. That's almost 20 per cent less than big name rivals.

And it's not overly endearing in its operation, either. The diesel is old school with plenty of clatter and some vibration to let you know it's working.

There's also some lag while the turbo sorts itself out, making for occasionally inconsistent progress. In any case it's leisurely by ute standards, albeit in a stout manner.

The eight-speed auto shifts cleanly enough and there's a low-range transfer case for slow speed off-road work; it's a part-time system that only allows all-paw operation on loose surfaces.

There's also a locking rear differential to maximise traction as well as a full-sized spare on a steel rim.

JAC also talks up some of the hardware in the T9. It includes that transfer case, which is made by BorgWarner, and a ZF transmission.

On the road the T9 is old school in its manners. The steering is slow to respond and the rugged suspension bounces off bumps with a reassuring solidity but not much in the way of comfort.

It's vague through bends in a trucky way. The safety systems can also beep and carry on when you don't want them to.

There's more to like off-road, although — again — it's not likely to fluster the class leaders. There's 210mm of ground clearance and 650mm wading capability, so it doesn't shy away from challenging terrain.

Really, though, the standout for the T9 is its price. It's solid value, even if there are compromises. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★½☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Tempting price undercuts big name utes
- ✔ Known hardware for some off-road capability
- ✔ Performed well in independent crash testing

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Little known brand and average attention to detail
- ✘ Old school diesel doesn't have much muscle
- ✘ Odd seating position
- ✘ Lacklustre dynamics

SPEX (T9 Haven)

- Made in China
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbodiesel
- 120kW of power/410Nm of torque
- 8.5L/100km city; 7.1L/100km country; CO2 emissions are 202g/km; fuel tank is 76L
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: 6 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, digital radio, leather, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 67%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

KGM Ssangyong Musso, GWM Cannon, LDV T60, BYD Shark 6, Toyota Hilux, Ford Ranger, Mitsubishi Triton, Nissan Navara, Kia Tasman, Isuzu D-Max, Volkswagen Amarok

JAECOO **J7** FROM **$34,990**

Sharp pricing and an eight-year warranty are drawcards for newcomer brand Jaecoo as it tries to tempt buyers from the influx of rivals infiltrating the lower end of the SUV market.

The semi-premium offshoot of Chery — Jaecoo is not taking on the luxury behemoths but plans to tempt buyers with more upmarket touches — is priced from $34,990 (all prices are drive-away) for the J7 mid-sized SUV.

The base Core gets a 137kW/275Nm 1.6-litre four-cylinder turbo petrol engine mated to a seven-speed twin-clutch transmission.

Standard gear includes 18-inch alloy wheels, synthetic leather, a suite of driver assistance systems. There's also a 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster and 13.2-inch central infotainment screen incorporating wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto (it can be confusing to navigate).

The Track is $37,990 and adds a powered tailgate, 360-degree camera, heated front seats, dual-zone ventilation, wireless phone charger, ambient lighting, driver's knee airbag, front parking sensors and rain sensing wipers.

The Ridge ($42,990) picks up a torque vectoring all-wheel drive system, as well as 19-inch wheels, panoramic sunroof, heated steering wheel, full-size spare wheel, ventilated front seats, puddle lights, inbuilt dashcam and a memory function for the power adjustable driver's seat.

Step up to the J7 SHS — or Super Hybrid System — for $47,990 and you get a head-up display and unique aero wheels with covers to improve air flow. There's also a 14.8-inch infotainment screen and various unique elements to the cabin, including different inner door linings and centre console.

The SHS model is powered by a 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbo hybrid system driving the front wheels (an all-wheel drive model is due later in 2025). The engine mates 105kW and 215Nm but it's the 150kW/310Nm electric motor doing most of the work.

It's fed by an 18.3kWh battery that claims 90km of EV range. Expect another 1000km-odd from the 60-litre fuel tank.

The idea is that you charge at home for EV driving around the suburbs but with the flexibility of hybrid range for longer trips. Charging from a standard home powerpoint takes about nine hours but the J7 can also top up from a public fast charger; it's claimed to go for 30 to 80 per cent state of charge in 20 minutes.

Around town the electric motor provides most of the thrust and makes for a punchy machine, especially by mid-sized SUV standards. It's responsive and useful, the petrol engine seamlessly kicking in to provide power at higher speeds or recharge the battery on the move.

The SHS is claimed to make a combined 255kW and 525Nm — big numbers by garden variety SUV standards — but it never feels that enthusiastic. Brisk, yes, but not ballistic.

The petrol engine versions are less impressive, mainly because of its twin-clutch auto transmission. It can be grabby and inconsistent in the way it engages with the engine, making for occasionally jerky progress, especially on hills or around town.

The J7 tends towards plush in the suspension, which may sound tempting, but it lacks the polish of better tuned rivals. Light steering and some vagueness means it never feels as planted as the best in the class. It gets the job done but the J7 doesn't have the dynamic poise many will want in a family SUV.

Elsewhere there's plenty to like. The J7 seats five in comfort and has a decent boot.

Those in the rear sit slightly higher and have slimmer side windows, which limits visibility slightly. But head and legroom are both decent.

The finishes and materials in the cabin are also thoroughly respectable. Sure, the leather is fake, but it's convincing enough, while patterned plastic is more interesting than slabs of grey. Flashes of silver liven things up, too, and things fit together nicely, suggesting above average build quality.

That in some ways sums up the J7. It hasn't rewritten the mid-sized SUV rulebook, but it adds some value-packed depth for those happy to overlook the big name brands. Like all newcomer brands, there's a question mark over resale values, but with lower prices and a long list of gear that'll be enough for many.

If the budget stretches it's the hybrid model that is a much better bet and makes sense for those who can charge at home. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Eight-year warranty is a winner
- ✔ Hybrid model provides EV-only driving and delivers on performance
- ✔ Generous list of standard gear

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Petrol-only transmission not always smooth
- ✘ Sloppy steering and dynamics take the edge off driving experience
- ✘ Infotainment screen packs too much in and can be confusing to navigate

SPEX (J7 SHS)

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol and 150kW/310Nm electric motor, single-speed hybrid transmission
- 255kW of power/525Nm of torque
- 90km claimed max EV range; 1.0L/100km is the official fuel figure, but expect closer to 5.5L/100km in hybrid mode; CO2 emissions are 31g/km; fuel tank is 60L
- Warranty: 8 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 54%; 5yr: 36%

compare with ...

Chery Tiggo 7, Haval H6, Toyota RAV4, Mazda CX-5, Mitsubishi Outlander, BYD Sealion 6, Nissan X-Trail, Volkswagen Tiguan

JAGUAR **F-PACE** FROM **$82,381**

Jaguar's F-Pace's mostly aluminium body draws on the basic elements of Jaguar's XE and XF sedans. Size-wise, the F-Pace is something of an in-betweenie. It's larger than a BMW X3, for example, but not as big as an X5.

It's certainly spacious enough to be a very useful family wagon. The 650-litre cargo compartment is a whopper and the rear seat, which features a three-piece folding backrest, is roomy.

F-Pace prices begin at $82,381 for the 184kW 2.0-litre turbopetrol four P250 R-Dynamic S, with an eight-speed auto and all wheel drive. The SE is $87,781.

The 221kW 3.0-litre straight six twin turbodiesel D300 R-Dynamic SE is $104,186.

The 294kW 3.0-litre straight six 400 Sport, with an electric compressor-driven turbo, is $127,131.

Both straight six engines also feature mild hybrid assitance.

The ballistic SVR, with a 405kW 5.0-litre supercharged V8, is $156,381. It flings the F-Pace from rest to 100km/h in just four seconds.

Though bulkier than other middleweight premium SUVs, the F-Pace has been skilfully styled. It's a very good-looking SUV indeed. At least from the outside.

The instrument panel features a broad, curved glass, landscape-oriented touchscreen for its infotainment system, and the cabin was given a restyling job in mid-2020 in a bid to lift its visual quality up to the high standards of its mostly German opposition.

F-Pace's party trick is the optional Activity Key, a waterproof wristband with an integrated transponder that allows you to leave your keys securely in the vehicle when you don't want to take them with you — if you're going for a swim or a surf, for example.

The transponder locks the vehicle and temporarily disables the key fob, so until you return it can't be started.

To drive, the F-Pace is among the best in class.

All variants blend ride comfort and handling agility with rare skill.

Jaguar collaborated with sister company Land Rover on the AWD set-up and although its drivetrain is high range only, the F-Pace has a decent degree of off-road ability, arguably more than its bitumen-focussed German rivals.

So what is "mild hybrid"? F-Pace's in-line six cylinder turbodiesel and turbopetrol engines use a 48 volt power supply, with regenerative energy from coasting and braking stored in a separate lithium ion battery, to boost bottom end and midrange performance and run the automatic stop start system. At no stage does the car run on electricity alone.

Tough EU emissions standards are driving this technology, and the result is excellent fuel efficiency in the light of these engines' capacity and outputs: 7.4L/100km for the diesel and 8.7L/100km for the petrol.

While the four isn't as sophisticated, it delivers perfectly adequate performance and, because it weighs less, slightly better handling.

The F-Pace has standard autonomous emergency braking and adaptive cruise in all grades. A late 2020 update added blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert.

Jaguar is owned by the same Indian conglomerate as Land Rover, and the F-Pace is also available with a Range Rover badge in the shape of the Velar.

In this class, Porsche's Macan is far and away the best drive, but it's on the small side and, of course, pretty pricey. Volvo's XC60 is a great family wagon and much cheaper than the F-Pace, as is the Genesis GV70. Mercedes has also got the new GLC300 on the market now, and engineering wise it's a decade newer than the F-Pace.

If you're not wedded to a "prestige" badge, try the Skoda Kodiaq, Subaru Outback and VW Tiguan Allspace as well. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★½
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★½☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Comfortable ride and tidy handling
- ✔ Muscular, frugal straight sixes
- ✔ Potent supercharged V8
- ✔ Rear seat and cargo space
- ✔ Solid and well built

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Limited front-seat knee room
- ✘ It's old by class standards
- ✘ Expensive servicing

SPEX (P400)

- Made in England
- 3.0-litre turbopetrol six/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 294kW of power at 5500rpm/550Nm of torque at 2000rpm
- 0–100km/h in 5.4 seconds (claimed)
- 6.9L/100km highway; 11.6L/100km city; CO_2 emissions are 202g/km; fuel tank is 82 litres
- Max towing weight 2400kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, 20-inch alloy wheels, leather upholstery, 11.4 inch touch screen, parking sensors, Bluetooth with voice control, navigation, power tailgate, automatic emergency braking, lane departure warning, tyre pressure monitoring, blind spot monitoring, LED headlights, surround cameras, space saver spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 67%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Alfa Stelvio, Audi Q5, Genesis GV70, Mercedes GLC, Porsche Macan, VW Tiguan

JEEP **AVENGER** FROM **$49,990**

Jeep
JJ-516 AV

An electric Jeep made for the suburbs!?

Better believe it. Yep, the Avenger is evidence of just how many stereotypes are being smashed as the car industry undergoes a revolution.

The classic American brand's first EV is tiny, has no aspirations of heading off-road and is manufactured in Poland.

That's because there's more Fiat thinking beneath the skin than chest-beating Jeep.

The Avenger shares its underpinnings with others from the Stellantis family, including from Jeep, Peugeot and Alfa Romeo.

Despite the diminutive dimensions — it's about 30cm shorter than a Toyota Corolla hatch — it's not cheap, with entry Longitude selling from $49,990.

Equipment levels are basic, too, with the entry Longitude missing out on blind spot warning. And while there are six airbags the Avenger didn't score well in various aspects of ANCAP testing, earning it a lowly three-star rating.

There's only single zone ventilation, cloth trim and the wheels are 17-inch alloys.

A 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster and 10.25-inch infotainment screen tick the tech boxes, although the six-speaker sound system is nothing special.

Arguably the most interesting features are the easter eggs that are arguably the most Jeep feature. The ladybug on one of the roof rails is different and the silhouette of a child in the corner of the windscreen looking at stars in the diagonally opposite corner continues the theme. Jeep branding is liberally applied throughout, too.

The Limited ($54,990) adds a powered tailgate, wireless phone charging, smart key entry, fake leather and that blind spot warning that should be across the range.

However, there's still no rear cross traffic alert, a feature now commonplace on most new cars.

The flagship Summit is a hefty $60,990 and adds 18-inch wheels, sunroof, heated and power adjustable front seats, massaging driver's seat, LED lights and various trim updates to lift the interior.

But underwhelming grey plastics dominate inside and struggle to live up to the price tag.

The cabin is small, too, especially in the back. Three across the rear is a challenge and legroom is tight. Plus, there are no rear air vents.

Cabin storage is modest, too, and the glovebox small.

The Avenger is powered by single electric motor driving the front wheels.

While there's easily accessible torque from the second you push the throttle, with just 115kW and 260Nm to play with by EV standards performance is leisurely.

It takes 9.0 seconds to top 100km/h and a decent hill can sap some of its enthusiasm.

The battery is only 54kWh, too, so range is limited to a claimed 396km on the Longitude and Limited or 390km in the Summit. Dial real-world expectations back to about 340km and it limits the appeal of a car that wears an adventurous badge.

And while there are Sand, Mud and Snow modes as part of the drive mode selector, with only the front wheels doing the driving and no spare wheel it's clearly a car designed for the city rather than the wilds.

Suspension tends towards firm, which makes for respectable control but takes the edge off comfort.

It ultimately leans on its front wheels if you're too eager into corners.

In a sea of new EVs the Avenger feels underdone. Perhaps fewer easter eggs and more substance may have been in order for such an important model.

A sharp price tag may have helped redeem it, but with the ask tripping over some impressive alternatives it makes Jeep's first EV one for the faithful only.

Even then, the lack of off-road nous may make this city slicker a rare commodity. ■

STARS ★★⯪☆☆

Safety
★★★☆☆
Performance
★★⯪☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★⯪☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ It looks like a Jeep (albeit a small one)
- ✔ Easy to maneuver around town

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Hefty price tag for a scantily clad EV
- ✘ Three-star ANCAP safety rating
- ✘ Finishes and materials don't live up to the price tag
- ✘ Small cabin, especially in the back
- ✘ Underwhelming performance and driving range

SPEX (Longitude)

- Made in Poland
- Single electric motor/single speed transmission/front-wheel drive
- 115kW of power/260Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 9.0 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 3496km
- Warranty: 5 years/100,000km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, cameras, navigation, digital radio, 17-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 47%; 5yr: 34%

compare with ...

Geely EX5, Zeekr X, BYD Atto 3, Tesla Model Y, Xpeng G6

JEEP **GLADIATOR** FROM **$78,250**

Is Jeep's first dual-cab ute worth the hype?

The JT Gladiator is proudly proclaimed a mongrel — "100 percent Jeep and 100 percent truck" is the tag line — since from the rear seat back, it's derived from the Dodge RAM 1500.

Gladiator is available in two 3.6-litre V6 petrol variants — Night Eagle, priced at $78,250, and Rubicon, at $87,250 — and boasts a parking space-busting 5.5-metre length, roof-off convertibility and proper 4x4 nous. Made for the big country, then.

Gladiator uses body-on-frame construction with a chassis consisting of live axles, coil springs and a five-link rear end. Jeep's established Selec-Trac 4WD system on the Night Eagle uses a low-range transfer case with a 4.1:1 final drive ratio, front and rear solid axles and off-road traction software.

Rubicon ups the ante with Jeep's ultimate off road Rock-Trac drivetrain, featuring electronic front and rear locking differentials with an optional limited-slip diff, a 77.2:1 crawl ratio, beefier Dana 44 axles and electronic sway-bar disconnect for greater wheel articulation. Serious bush-bashing stuff.

Even with reduced approach, rollover and departure angles compared to the shorter wheelbase Wrangler, Gladiator Rubicon is still a masterful device off the beaten track.

That's all good and well for the action/adventure junkie seeking to climb every mountain and ford every stream, but as the weekday workhorse commuter, the Rubicon's obsessive off-road focus makes it a blunt on-road instrument.

For now, Chrysler's 209kW/347Nm 3.6-litre V6 is it as far as engines go. Paired to a slick eight-speed auto, it provides reasonable acceleration if you mash the pedal down hard, assisted by helpful gearing that partly compensates for its lack of bottom end grunt.

Load it up, however, and the Pentastar has its work cut out hauling the 2.3-tonne plus behemoth about, needing to regularly visit the upper echelons of the rev range for the required muscle. Occasionally thrashy, at least it features stop/start tech as a nod to curbing fuel consumption, which is still inevitably high.

The Rubicon's 4x4-biased rubber, meanwhile, really dulls the steering's on-road precision, making the Gladiator ponderous through even slower turns, offering a disconnected, disconcerting lightness that discourages any form of cornering at speed.

The more urban-centric Night Eagle is a better bet dynamically. On the other hand, those big, baggy dual purpose tyres effectively cushion the cabin from road shock.

Mirroring the current Wrangler, Gladiator's dash offers stylised instrumentation, excellent storage, effective ventilation and a modern multimedia set-up, including navigation, within a large touchscreen display.

Seat support rates highly, there's adequate room up front, unimpeded vision and plenty of space out back, too. However, the driving position is compromised by the lack of a driver's seat height adjuster, the wide transmission tunnel encroaches on the driver's left foot space and there's a fair amount of road noise rumbling into the cabin.

Further back, while far from class leading, the tub was designed to accommodate two trail bikes. Payload is significantly lower than most one tonners at just 693kg and at GVM the maximum legal towing weight is 2721kg.

Which neatly sums up the Gladiator. It makes a lifestyle statement through distinctive, evocative design as well as commanding off-road capability, while not really excelling in on-road finesse or day-to-day workhorse practicality. Three stars out of five in ANCAP crash tests is a worry, too.

For Gladiator money, you can buy a top spec Ford Ranger or VW Amarok 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel. In every respect bar pose value, they are better utes. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★☆☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Outstanding off-road capability
- ✔ Head-turning styling
- ✔ Simple and fast fabric roof folding mechanism
- ✔ Surprising amount of space for five adults
- ✔ Very user-friendly control layout

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ No diesel option
- ✘ Petrol V6 is pretty ordinary and thirsty
- ✘ Poor ANCAP crash-test result
- ✘ Massive turning circle
- ✘ 693kg payload and 2721kg max towing are less than most utes

SPEX (Rubicon)

- Made in the USA
- 3.6-litre V6 turbopetrol/eight-speed automatic/4x4
- 209kW of power at 6400rpm/347Nm of torque at 4100rpm
- 0-100km in 8.0 seconds (approx.)
- 13.6L/100km highway; 8.3L/100km city; 91 octane; CO2 emissions are 239g/km; fuel tank is 81 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Maximum towing weight: 2721kg
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, blind-spot monitor, adaptive cruise, hill-start assist, hill descent control, tyre-pressure monitors, 8.4-inch touchscreen, navigation, camera, Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, 17-inch alloys and a full-sized spare wheel
- Redbook future values: 3yr: NA; 5yr: NA

compare with ...

Ford Ranger, Dodge RAM 1500, Chevrolet Silverado, VW Amarok V6

JEEP **WRANGLER** FROM **$75,950**

This Wrangler might look like the old one, but this latest generation is new from the wheels up.

Importantly for Jeep fans, though, this model retains the indoor/outdoor body configurability unique to Wrangler.

The doors can be removed, the roof comes off and the windscreen can be folded down over the bonnet if you really want to experience the great outdoors. Off road it's more capable than ever — so it keeps faith with the fans on that score, too.

In 2024 a 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo petrol engine replaced the ageing V6. While it went backwards on power (200kW versus 209kW) it muscled up on torque, boosting from 353Nm to 400Nm.

As before it's matched to an eight-speed automatic. No manual is available.

The four door Unlimited Sport S is $75,950, the Overland is $83,950 and the range tops out at $89,450 for Rubicon.

The short wheelbase two-door model is only available as a more off-road focused Rubicon, priced at $82,950.

The 2024 update not only sharpened prices but also brought more gear, including a larger 12.3-inch infotainment screen with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

There's also 17-inch alloys, heated steering wheel and front seats, ambient lighting and a nine-speaker Alpine sound system with subwoofer.

Overland models get classier trim, sat-nav and uprated suspension with 18-inch alloys.

The Rubicon gets Nappa leather, 32-inch off-road tyres, various hardware upgrades to improve traction (including front and rear locking diffs) and a better 4x4 system designed to improve capability.

Rubicon models also now get a forward-facing TrailCam to aid visibility in tricky situations.

When it was launched in April 2019, the Wrangler got a one-star Euro NCAP/ANCAP crash test rating in a world where five stars are now the norm.

Wrangler's safety score was raised to three stars in late 2019 following the fitting of autonomous emergency braking (AEB) and blind spot monitoring as standard on all models.

However, the EuroNCAP report also said: "Dummy readings, together with the penalty applied for the unstable bodyshell, resulted in protection of the driver chest being rated as weak."

At least Jeep has addressed other key areas, such as infotainment and cabin comfort. The interior has a more upmarket appearance and the dash is more stylish and efficient in design.

Your knuckles no longer hit the dash as you grab the gear lever and the steering has height and reach adjustment.

Seats are flat but supportive, although there's limited front-seat travel for long-legged drivers.

Rear leg room is more generous than before. The roll bar still intrudes a little on rear head space and the cargo area.

The larger footprint means the Wrangler holds the road well.

The new 2.0-litre engine is a huge improvement, too. Additional torque lower in the rev range makes it more relaxed and easier to drive. It works well with the eight-speed auto, too.

It calls for premium unleaded, though, and isn't particularly economical.

Off-road is where the Wrangler really shines. There's terrific wheel travel and traction aids to help clamber over challenging terrain remarkably easily.

Nothing else on the market offers this level of fair-dinkum 4x4 ability in two- or four-door hardtop body configurations. So Wrangler remains unique. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★☆☆
Performance
★★★⯨☆
Handling
★★★☆☆ (off-road ★★★★☆)
Quality and reliability
★★☆☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ There's nothing else like it
- ✔ Off-road ability ranges from very good to brilliant
- ✔ Much-improved cabin comfort, space and infotainment
- ✔ Much-improved on-road performance and handling
- ✔ 2.0 turbo has much more accessible pulling power than old V6

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Not particularly economical
- ✘ Three star crash test score
- ✘ It's a lot of money for a fun car that is compromised
- ✘ Jeep quality and reliability are still live issues

SPEX (Overland)

- Made in the USA
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo petrol/eight-speed automatic/ dual range 4x4
- 200kW of power/400Nm of torque
- 7.7L/100km highway; 11.7L/100km city; premium unleaded; CO2 emissions are 209gkm. Fuel tank is 81 litres
- Max towing weight 2495kg
- Warranty: Five years/100,000km
- Standard: Four airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, park assist, automatic headlights, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, 18-inch alloy wheels
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 58%

compare with ...

GWM Tank 300, Toyota 76 Series

KGM SANGYONG **MUSSO** FROM **$40,000**

KGM Sangyong is a South Korean subsidiary of Tata, the same Indian maker that also owns Land Rover and Jaguar.

Powered by a 133kW/400Nm 2.2-litre turbodiesel four and with part-time, dual range 4WD, the Musso dual cab ute range opens with the six-speed automatic ELX, at $40,000 drive away.

Standard equipment includes 17-inch alloys, parking sensors, Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, 12.3 inch touchscreen infotainment and digital instrument panels and dual zone air.

Adventure is $43,500 drive away, Ultimate is $46,000 and Luxury, tested here at $49,000, adds frilly stuff: highly polished 20 inch alloys — that look all wrong — a slab of decorative plastic behind the cabin, sunroof, leather, power adjustable front seats and heated rear seats.

There's also a liner, 12 volt outlet and load lugs in the tub, which at 1300mm is about 200mm shorter than most one tonners. Payload is 790kg.

A long wheelbase Musso XLV, with an extended tub, leaf spring rear suspension and 1010kg payload, starts at $41,500 for the ELX. Adventure (with an 880kg payload) is $45,000, Ultimate is $47,500 and Luxury is $50,500.

Despite five link, coil-spring rear suspension, the short wheelbase Musso Ultimate's ride is old school one tonner — lumpy and rugged, though Sssangyong claims to have improved compliance on the 2024 update. ELX's 17-inch wheels and taller tyres would absorb impacts more effectively.

Reach adjustment for the wheel is a feature found in few one tonners, so tall drivers don't have to endure a cramped seating position. A firm, high rear bench is a little tight for legroom and quite narrow, so three will be a squeeze.

You wouldn't carry a person in the middle anyway, because the seatbelt is lap-only.

Autonomous emergency braking and lane departure warning are standard. Ultimate also includes blind spot monitoring plus rear cross traffic alert, tyre pressure monitoring, 360 degree camera coverage and a rear seat safety exit warning.

Musso hasn't yet been ANCAP crash tested, but with that lap-only belt in the back seat it would not score five stars.

Peak torque of 400Nm kicks in at 1400rpm, so after a moment's lag the 2.2 pulls willingly, smoothly and quietly.

Its best work is done by 3000rpm; Eco, Winter (for second gear starts) and Power modes for the occasionally indecisive six-speed automatic seem to make little difference.

Expect 6-7L/100km on the highway and 10-12L/100km in town, which is about average.

Claimed maximum towing weight is 3500kg; at gross vehicle mass (2880kg, including 790kg payload) it's 3100kg.

Handling is as competent as some more expensive rivals, albeit compromised by dual purpose tyres. The coil spring rear is well-controlled so roadholding is secure and on corrugations the back end doesn't try to swap places with the front. Light and vague on centre, the steering becomes heavy when you turn the wheel. Unlike most rivals with rear drums, Musso's brakes are discs all round.

Fit decent all terrain tyres and it has some off road ability. A limited slip rear diff, hill descent control and hill start assist are also standard. Axle articulation is limited, though, as is clearance (215mm); it's also missing a locking rear diff.

Musso ELX, especially the long wheelbase variant, is good value buying if you just want an honest, well-made 4x4 dual cab one-tonner. Overall quality, refinement, comfort, handling and performance are markedly superior to Chinese-brand rivals such as GWM and LDV. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯪☆☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Can't argue with the price
- ✔ Excellent driver assist safety tech
- ✔ Refined, tractable 2.2-litre turbodiesel
- ✔ Long warranty and cheap servicing
- ✔ Reach adjustment for the steering wheel

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Lap only belt in the centre of the back seat
- ✘ Short tub
- ✘ Coil springs limit payload
- ✘ Non-stick tyres

SPEX (Ultimate Luxury)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.2-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/ six-speed automatic/part time 4x4
- 133kW of power at 4000rpm/400Nm of torque from 1400-2800rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 7.2L/100km highway; 10.9L/100km city; CO2 emissions N/A; fuel tank is 75 litres
- Max towing weight 3500kg
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, lane departure warning, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, 360 degree cameras, tyre pressure monitoring, Bluetooth, leather, heated and cooled front seats, heated rear seats, 20-inch alloys, full size spare, sunroof, tub liner.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 68%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Foton Tunland, GWM Cannon, LDV T60, Mahindra Pik-Up, Mitsubishi Triton

KIA **STONIC** FROM **$25,660**

Kia's smallest SUV, the Stonic, is based on the Rio hatchback.

Prices start at $25,660 for the 74kW/172Nm 1.0-litre three-cyliner turbopetrol seven-speed dual-clutch automatic Stonic S.

For 2025, the manual version is no longer on sale, with the previous 1.4-litre engine also dropped — the 1.0-litre the sole engine.

So at base model level Stonic is one of the cheapest SUVs on the market, along with its main rival, the Hyundai Venue.

Stonic Sport, with the same drivetrain is $28,790. We tested the GT Line, at $31,980.

Safety specification is basic. Autonomous emergency braking, lane keep assist, six airbags and a camera are standard, but that's about it. A monitor tells you when a rear door is being opened. There's no blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert or adaptive cruise, even as options.

An 8.0-inch touchscreen, Apple CarPlay/Android Auto and 15-inch steel wheels are standard on S; Sport adds 17-inch alloys, navigation and a few other frills.

GT Line includes sportier suspension, sticky Continental tyres on 17 inch alloys, sunroof and go fast interior décor.

Kia's 1.4-litre, which we've driven in the Rio, was a sluggish, old tech thing, but the 1.0-litre turbo triple is an entirely different proposition. It features clever engineering that's designed to deliver strong pulling power from low revs, making it well suited for city driving and highway cruising. It's not a performance engine, but it does do the job responsively, smoothly and efficiently in everyday driving.

It will return 4-5L/100km on the highway, which is less than some hybrids. Around town, expect 6-7L/100km, assisted by auto stop/start and the refined, well calibrated seven-speed dual clutch transmission. It runs on regular unleaded, too, which is unusual for a turbo. Most require premium.

Stonic's lane keeping function is overly intrusive, with the wheel being constantly tugged in your hands when the car is still a long way from the lane markings. You can turn it off, but you have to do so every time you start the car.

Stiff suspension on the GT, especially at the front, plus light weight, decent tyres and sharp, accurate steering give the Stonic better than average cornering ability, and it sits on the road very securely. However the price is an overly firm and at times harsh ride, as the front end in particular fails to absorb road shock. The brakes also lack power.

A clean, uncluttered, stylish dash features easy to read analogue instruments and a high-mounted touchscreen. Voice control is available only by connecting your phone via Apple CarPlay or Android Auto. There's ample driving position adjustability, and the GT's well bolstered seat is comfortable and supportive. One USB and 12 volt outlet are provided.

Rear seat space is tight. That said, it's not a bad place for kids, with a USB connector, elevated bench and wide opening doors for easy access.

A average-sized boot has a deep well, a couple of bag hooks, and an extendable floor with the 60/40 split fold rear seatback, albeit with a step in the middle.

Stonic GT goes up against some classy rivals, including the Skoda Kamiq, Ford Puma, Subaru Crosstrek and VW T-Cross. In this A-grade company, it's not quite as well sorted on the road, or as well equipped, particularly in driver assist safety tech, as it needs to be. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★☆☆☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Kia's quality and seven years warranty
- ✔ The 1.0-litre is willing and very economical
- ✔ Tidy handling and accurate steering
- ✔ Comfortable driver's seat and driving position
- ✔ Big boot

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ GT doesn't quite cut it against $30K rivals
- ✘ Minimal safety tech
- ✘ Hard ride
- ✘ Tight rear seat space
- ✘ Overly intrusive lane keep assist

SPEX (GT-Line)

- Made in South Korea
- 1.0-litre three cylinder turbopetrol/ seven-speed twin clutch automatic/ front-wheel drive
- 74kW of power from 4500-6000rpm/172Nm of torque from 1500-4000rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 4.9L/100km highway; 6.4L/100km city; 91 regular; CO2 emissions are 125gkm; fuel tank is 45 litres
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, lane keep assist, camera, eight-inch touchscreen, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, sunroof, automatic air, 17-inch alloys, space saver spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 48%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-3, Hyundai Venue, Toyota Yaris Cross, GWM Haval Jolion, Suzuki Vitara

KIA **SELTOS** FROM **$30,050**

Kia's compact Seltos SUV opens at $30,050 for the 110kW 2.0 litre petrol/ continuously variable auto/front-wheel drive Seltos S.

Seltos Sport is $33,250, Sport+ is $36,350 and GT-Line is $42,050.

All-wheel drive models start at $39,870 for the 146kW 1.6-litre turbopetrol/eight-speed automatic transmission Seltos Sport+, which we're testing here.

Top spec Seltos GT-Line, with the same drivetrain, is $45,470.

A huge 10.25 inch touchscreen sits atop the dash and instruments are digital. There's no stand alone voice control, so unless you pair your phone via Apple CarPlay or Android Auto, (wireless in S; wired on other models) you have to do almost everything by touch.

The driver's seat lacks upper body support and the head restraint is intrusive if you like the backrest upright.

Back stalls feature plenty of legroom and a firm bench. Air vents and a USB C socket are also provided.

Sport+ includes all the important driver assist tech, plus adaptive cruise. Lane keep assist is very sensitive, so I turned it off.

Seltos Sport+ has been engineered to drive like a premium Euro SUV, which it does pretty convincingly.

The bonus with a Kia badge is that you don't have to put up with most of the aggravations of Euro SUV ownership: a short three years warranty, questionable reliability and durability and a premium unleaded thirst.

Expensive servicing is one ownership downside Seltos does share with the Europeans.

Kia's 1.6 pulls easily and smoothly off the bottom, with excellent throttle response, and though it never has to work hard it does spin more willingly, and tunefully, than most turbos at the top end, especially in Sport mode. Its 146kW makes it one of the most powerful engines fitted to a compact SUV.

Dual clutch transmissions, notably VW/Audi units, can hesitate to engage from rest and dither in crawling traffic. Kia has now replaced the Seltos' seven-speed DCT with a conventional eight-speed automatic, which results in better reliability, a smoother drive and lower servicing costs.

All-wheel drive elevates the driving experience to blue chip Euro levels. Drive a Seltos back to back with a BMW X1 and ask yourself where the BMW earns its extra money.

Kia's local suspension tuning can on some models produce a hard, unforgiving ride, but Seltos strikes the right balance between comfort and handling. It's still firm, though compliant, quiet and well-controlled.

Seltos is tight and secure on rough roads and well-balanced in corners, with reasonable grip.

Electric power steering has a strong self centring effect thanks to servo-motor assistance. It feels bit weird at first, but you soon get used to it. Steering feel and precision are fine.

All-wheel drive with a locking centre differential (at speeds below 40km/h), hill descent control and a full size spare on an alloy wheel give Seltos greater ability off the bitumen than most SUVs too.

Seltos sounds like something you buy at the chemist, but it's one of the best drives in the compact SUV class, especially the 1.6-litre turbopetrol/all wheel drive, with premium Euro-style drivetrain engineering, dynamics, ride and refinement. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Ride and Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★½☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Strong performance
- ✔ Excellent ride/handling compromise
- ✔ Well equipped with safety features
- ✔ Big boot
- ✔ Seven years warranty
- ✔ Excellent quality and reliability
- ✔ All wheel drivetrain works on dirt roads

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Driver's seat isn't particularly comfortable
- ✘ Touchscreen is too far away and small icons are difficult to hit
- ✘ No stand alone voice control
- ✘ Expensive servicing

SPEX (1.6T Sport+)

- Made in South Korea
- 1.6-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/ seven-speed dual clutch auto/all-wheel drive
- 146kW of power at 6000rpm/265Nm of torque from 1500-4500rpm
- 0-100km/h: N/A
- 6.2L/100km highway; 9.5L/100km city, 91 regular; CO2 emissions are 175gkm
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, lane keep assist, adaptive cruise, LED headlights, 17-inch alloy wheels, touchscreen, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, navigation, wireless phone charging.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 64%

compare with ...

Hyundai Kona, Mazda CX-30, Toyota Corolla Cross, Chery Omoda 5, Nissan Qashqai

KIA **EV3** FROM **$47,600**

The Kia EV3 blends the rugged good looks of the large EV9 with small SUV thinking and a price tag that takes the electric car fight to Chinese newcomers.

Priced from $47,600 the EV3 is the Korean brand's most affordable EV. For that you get the Air, which comes with 17-inch alloys, dual-zone ventilation, wireless phone charging and vast screens across the dash incorporating wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. Plus, there's auto braking, blind spot warning and vehicle-to-load (V2L) that allows household devices to be powered by a regular powerpoint; it's handy if there's a blackout!

The Standard Range gets a 58.3kWh battery that claims 436km between charges or you can choose the Long Range ($53,315) with an 81.4kWh battery and 604km of range.

The Earth ($58,600) and GT-Line ($63,950) each gets that larger battery, albeit with a shorter 563km of claimed range due to 19-inch alloy wheels with stickier tyres.

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

The Earth also adds fake leather trim, a powered driver's seat, powered tailgate, heated steering wheel, heated and ventilated front seats and various trim changes that give it a more upmarket look.

The GT-Line builds on that with unique bumpers for a sportier look, an eight-speaker Harman Kardon sound system, ambient lighting, memory function for the driver's seat, powered passenger seat, tinted windows and more advanced exterior lights with a welcome function that displays a fancy pattern.

Like the upcoming EV5, the EV3 runs a 400V electrical architecture — rather than the 800V system on the EV6 and EV9 — that limits the peak DC fast charge rate to 100kW, or 127kW with the bigger battery. A 10-80 per cent charge takes about half an hour.

All share the same 150kW/283Nm electric motor driving the front wheels. It zips to 100km/h in as little as 7.5 seconds, or 7.9 seconds for the heavier GT-Line.

That's thoroughly acceptable, especially with the immediacy of an electric motor that makes cruising through traffic a snip.

Regenerative braking can be adjusted by paddles on the wheel and an intelligent mode responds to other vehicles, even bringing the car to a complete stop without having to touch the brake pedal.

Light steering is responsive and the nuggety SUV feels nicely planted.

Despite its diminutive exterior dimensions — it's slightly shorter but wider than a Kia Seltos — the EV3 dishes up decent cabin space.

Those up front have a large storage console on the floor and available sliding arm rest (it gets rid of the covered centre console).

The front seats are nicely bolstered and mesh headrests a luxurious touch.

The flat floor makes foot space generous in the rear while headroom is also adequate for adults. Three across the back seat will be limited to smaller frames, the EV3 better suited to four people.

The boot is useful by small SUV standards, something helped by 60/40 spit-folding back seats and sizeable underfloor binnacle. There's also a charge cable-swallowing 25 litres under the bonnet.

In line with its environmental focus the EV3 is bursting with recycled materials, from the dash plastics and seat trim to carpet and headrests. Some interior finishes are coated in bio-paint.

All of which ticks the sustainability box, although some of those plastics feel built to a price rather than reinforcing the upmarket flavour on display elsewhere.

Dual 12.5-inch screens interspersed by a 5-inch ventilation display add up to 30 inches of pixels sprawling across the dash.

While it's undercut by some Chinese rivals, the EV3 delivers rugged good looks and a solid driving experience, along with plenty of range if you splash out on the bigger battery.

All of which should provide temptation for those looking at petrol propulsion that still dominates at the smaller end of the SUV market. ■

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Nuggety good looks
- ✔ Zippy driving manners and long EV range for bigger battery
- ✔ Well thought-out interior
- ✔ Loads of tech

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Interior finishes don't quite live up to the price tag
- ✘ Prices add up with the bigger battery
- ✘ Great seven-year warranty, but battery only covered for 150,000km
- ✘ No spare wheel

SPEX (EV3 GT-Line)

- Made in South Korea
- Single electric motor, single-speed transmission, front-wheel drive
- 150kW of power/283Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.9 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 563km
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, imitation leather, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 61%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

BYD Atto 3, MG ZS EV, Hyundai Kona Electric, Peugeot e-2008

KIA **SPORTAGE** FROM **$32,995**

Kia's latest Sportage is a twin under the skin with Hyundai's Tucson. Both are much improved SUVs compared with their predecessors, and have effectively moved up a size too, offering greater interior space.

Value for money is still a key part of the Kia's appeal, as is its seven years warranty.

Fifth generation Sportage kicks off at $32,995 for the carryover 115kW/192Nm 2.0-litre petrol/six-speed manual/front-drive S model. A six-speed auto, tested here, adds $2000. This drivetrain tops out at $42,050 for the SX+.

A 132kW/265Nm 1.6-litre turbopetrol/seven-speed dual clutch automatic/all-wheel drive model starts at $44,050 for SX+, or $49,920 in GT Line trim.

A 137kW/416Nm 2.0-litre turbodiesel/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive option is available from $40,395 in the S. SX, also tested here, is $42,950, SX+ is $47,450 and GT Line is $52,920.

There's also a front-drive hybrid SX at $56,770 or a GT-Line for $55,420.

Sportage S may be the base model but it looks like money. A beautifully styled exterior could easily be mistaken for a premium Euro. Inside, Kia's designers have done a great job disguising its low price, with an elegant, conservative approach, convincing fake metal and not too much gloss black plastic. Fit and finish is up to Kia's usual excellent standard.

Most of what you need is standard in the S auto, including the driver assist must have safety trifecta: autonomous emergency braking — including at an intersection if you try to turn across oncoming traffic — blind spot monitoring and adaptive cruise, which can recognise speed advisory signs and adjust your speed accordingly. Lane keeping is also included.

Infotainment at base model level doesn't extend to navigation or voice control, but Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are standard.

Seating is basic, acceptably comfortable and manually adjustable. There's lots of space in the back seat, plus easy access and centre console vents. At this level, you get no rear USBs, so the kids will get bored and fractious on a long trip. Boot space is generous, the extended floor is almost flat, and a full size spare on an alloy wheel is underneath.

Sportage's 2.0-litre petrol lacks mid-range torque compared with the turbocharged alternatives, however it does run on regular 91 octane and does the job OK. On the highway, it cruises easily and can return 6-7L/100km. In town, expect 11-13L/100km.

The 2.0-litre turbodiesel (now a rarity in mid-sized SUVs) is a great engine, with strong, responsive pulling power at low revs, low noise levels and the ability to do 5L/100km on the highway.

The hybrid pairs a 132kW/265Nm 1.6-litre turbo with a 44kW/264Nm electric motor for a combined 169kW/350Nm. It delivers on performance while sippping about 5.5L/100km.

Kia tunes its suspension for our rough road conditions, and Sportage is a safe, secure drive with excellent roadholding and a comfortable ride.

The all-wheel drivetrain in Sportage 2.0-litre turbodiesel adds an extra measure of grip, poise and ability. It's one of the best handling SUVs on the market, at any price.

Kia's Sportage, and the Hyundai Tucson, were not long ago considered B-grade SUVs. They're still cheaper than most rivals, but they're now A graders as well. If you're looking for a safe, practical, well-made family wagon below $40K, the Sportage S petrol is a good thing, while the 2.0 turbodiesel SX and GT-Line are comparable with German brand SUVs that cost tens of thousands of dollars more. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Ride and Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯨☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Good value, especially the 2.0-litre turbodiesels
- ✔ Excellent built, fit and finish quality
- ✔ Reliable, and backed by a long warranty
- ✔ Well equipped with safety tech
- ✔ Spacious and comfortable

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ 2.0-litre petrol engine doesn't have a lot of torque
- ✘ Uses a bit of fuel in town, too
- ✘ Touchscreen is a reach from the driver's seat
- ✘ Wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity can be temperamental
- ✘ No rear seat USBs

SPEX (S auto)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.0-litre four cylinder petrol/six-speed automatic/front-wheel drive
- 115kW of power at 6200rpm/192Nm of torque at 4500rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.5L/100km highway; 11.0L/100km city; 91 regular; CO2 emissions are 184km; fuel tank is 54 litres
- Max towing weight 1650kg
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, blind spot monitoring, speed sign recognition, wireless Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, digital instruments, 17-inch alloy wheels, full size spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 74%; 5yr: 66%

compare with ...

Toyota RAV4, Hyundai Tucson, Mazda CX-5, Nissan X-Trail, Subaru Forester, Mitsubishi Outlander, BYD Sealion 6

KIA **EV5** FROM **$56,770**

Kia makes no secret that the EV5 has the Tesla Model Y firmly in its crosshairs. No point mucking around if you want to take on the EV market leader!

Like the Tesla the EV5 is a mid-sized SUV sourced from China.

And it is aiming to tempt buyers with sharp pricing that starts at $56,770 for the single motor Air or $61,170 for the Long Range with an 88.1kWh battery versus the 64.2kWh battery of the Standard Range. By the time drive-away pricing is applied the difference between the two is more dramatic, making it a difficult leap to the Long Range.

Standard kit includes seat trim that is a mix of cloth and faux leather. There are also 18-inch wheels, heated front seats and a massage function for the driver.

Kia Connect allows monitoring and control of things such as door locks via a smartphone app and there are dual 12.3-inch screens interspersed by a 5-inch display for the ventilation system.

Step up to the EV5 Earth ($64,770) and you get the bigger battery, 19-inch alloys, more synthetic leather, a powered tailgate and an extra motor for all-wheel drive.

The EV5 GT-Line ($71,770) gets 20-inch wheels, fingerprint recognition for selecting driver profiles, a 360-degree camera, panoramic sunroof, heated and cooled rear storage box, augmented reality head-up display, remote park assist and an eight-speaker Harman Kardon sound system. There are also black design highlights and unique bumpers.

The EV5 has a quasi-industrial look to its cabin. The layout works, but a plethora of recycled plastics tick the environmental boxes but don't have the upmarket flavour of some recent Kia cabins. Silver and copper highlights liven things but there's still a sense it's been built to a price.

There's no shortage of space, although the door pockets are small. Thankfully the centre console makes up for it with a couple of cupholders and a huge floor-mounted receptacle.

Instead of a traditional centre console there's an extension of the padded seat with a pouch built in; it works nicely for a phone or set of keys.

Poke around the cabin, though, and there are some thoughtful additions, a shopping hook that flips out of the dash and jacket holders in the backs of the front headrests.

In the back there's no shortage of headroom as well as foot and leg space.

Air vents in the side pillars provide fresh air to those in the back, too, and the 513-litre boot has a flat floor with two segmented covers that open up to handy underfloor storage pods. Plus there's a 67-litre frunk.

It's a twist of the drive selector mounted on the steering column to choose Drive or Reverse.

With 160kW/310Nm performance from single motor models is acceptable without being scintillating; it's helped by easy access to pulling power. Paddles allow adjustment of the regenerative braking from coasting to decent deceleration.

But channeling all the drive through the front wheels keeps the tyres busy. And there's some torque steer, where the steering wheel fights against your hands in an effort to return to the central position. It's not bad, but it niggles away.

Dual motor models have more fire, a 70kW/170Nm rear motor leading to a combined 230kW/480Nm.

Local suspension tuning has endowed the EV5 with respectable manners, though. The EV5 shuns big bumps nicely and looks after occupants well.

In an era of bubbly designs and tech overload the EV5's middle-of-the-road approach will be a welcome reminder of normality for those just wanting an EV that gets the job done.

While it doesn't set any benchmarks, it does make EV life familiar. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★★☆

11:21 AM
61%
1.6 km
304 km
316 km

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Tempting (and normal) antidote to Tesla
- ✔ Stylish and spacious cabin delivers on practicality
- ✔ Composed and comfortable driving dynamics

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Basic equipment level of entry Air
- ✘ Torque steer detracts from otherwise composed manners
- ✘ Big price leap to Long Range

SPEX (Air)

- Made in China
- Single electric motor/64.2kWh battery/single-speed automatic/front-wheel drive
- 160kW of power/310Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 8.5 seconds (SR), 8.9 seconds (LR) (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 400km (SR), 555km (LR)
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, navigation, digital radio, partial fake leather, heated front seats, massaging driver's seat, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 64%; 5yr: 51%

compare with ...

Hyundai Ioniq 5, Tesla Model Y, BYD Sealion 7, Polestar 2, Volkswagen ID.4

KIA **EV6** FROM **$72,590**

Although they look slightly different, as far as the hardware you can't see is concerned, including the EV drivetrains, Kia's EV6 is the same car as Hyundai's Ioniq5.

Kia prices start at $72,590 for the 168kW single motor/rear-wheel EV6 Air. GT Line is $79,590.

Kia claims a range of up to 528km; with the identical drivetrain, Hyundai claims 507km for the Ioniq 5 Dynamiq.

In the GT-Line dual electric motor/all-wheel drive model tested here, most numbers are the same as some versions of the Hyundai Ioniq 5. Both produce 239kW of power and 605Nm of torque, the EV6 darting to 100km/h in a pretty rapid 5.2 seconds.

A 77.4kWh battery provides up to 484km of range for the dual motor model.

The Kia, at $87,590 for the AWD, is pricier than the most affordable Hyundai Ioniq 5 AWD ($85,300).

This presumably is in keeping with Kia's evolving high voltage performance image, and the EV6 GT-Line AWD certainly looks the part, especially the test car's elegant Moonscape Matte grey, paired with 20-inch alloy wheels. Think 21st century DeLorean. EV6 GT-Line is no EV nerdmobile. It looks fast, expensive and interesting. Flush fitting door handles pop out as you approach. Pointy end EV techno-chic interior décor features panoramic, hi-res infotainment and instrument screens, a slim, straight line dash to amplify a sense of space, LED mood lighting, the must-have "sustainable materials" trim (ie plastics instead of timber and leather), and a loaded standard equipment list that includes Meridian audio, remote parking with the key fob and heated/ventilated front seats.

GT-Line AWD is a serious sports luxury sedan that just happens to be battery powered. It feels quicker to 100km/h than Kia's claim, especially in Sport mode where it absolutely leaps off the line and overtakes with supreme, silent stealth. Frequency-dependent suspension dampers — technology shared with Mercedes AMG and Maserati — work well on our rough roads at speed, exercising tight control over the car's considerable 2.1 tonnes. Handling-wise, the Kia feels completely planted and can hold its own with premium Euros. Local suspension tuning shows here in that it's also noticeably more taut than the Hyundai Ioniq 5. Demerits are heavy, numb steering, overly-intrusive lane keep assist and a slightly terse ride on big 20 inch wheels at suburban speeds.

You can get close to Kia's claimed 484km in town; on the open road, a realistic range is about 350km. Plug the Kia into a household power point and you're looking at about three days to recharge the battery from 10 to 80 percent. A 7.4kW wallbox will do it overnight and a 350kW public fast charger can do it in a claimed 18 minutes. GT-Line also has vehicle to load (V2L) charging capability via interior and exterior plugs, allowing household devices to be powered from the car.

The entire EV6 range is impressive, and more than competitive with most $100,000-plus Euro rivals in terms of luxury, technology and driving enjoyment. The Kia's nearest rival is — you guessed it — Hyundai's Ioniq5, but you should also test drive the Polestar 2 and Tesla's Model Y. ▪

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Bold, imaginative design inside and out
- ✔ GT Line is a genuine performance car
- ✔ And a genuine luxury car
- ✔ Great handling at speed
- ✔ Decent range
- ✔ Seven years warranty

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Overly intrusive lane keep assist
- ✘ Ride is pretty firm
- ✘ Not much steering feel

SPEX (GT Line)

- Made in South Korea
- Dual electric motor/77.4kWh battery/single-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 239kW of power/605Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.2 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum range 484km
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Maximum towing capacity 1600kg
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, surround cameras, variable speed limiter, adaptive cruise, rear cross traffic alert and AEB, Meridian audio, wireless phone charging, navigation, wired Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, heated and ventilated front seats, sunroof, remote parking with the keyfob, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 61%; 5yr: 46%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, Hyundai Ioniq 5, Polestar 4, BYD Sealion 7

KIA **SORENTO** FROM **$50,880**

Kia's fourth generation Sorento seven-seater SUV kicks off at $50,880 for the 200kW 3.5-litre V6 petrol/eight-speed automatic/front wheel drive S model. Sport is $53,500, Sport Plus is $58,430 and GT Line is $65,790.

A 148kW 2.2-litre four cylinder turbodiesel is paired with a dual clutch eight-speed transmission and all-wheel drive in the same model grades for $3000 more.

There's also a hybrid in GT-Line trim from $70,300 or $73,330 as an all-wheel drive.

Topping the range is a $84,660 plug-in hybrid (PHEV) that uses the same 132kW/265Nm 1.6-litre turbo but with a bigger battery; that takes combined outputs from 169kW/350Nm in the hybrid to 195kW/350Nm in the PHEV.

There are digital instruments and rear view mirror on GT-Line, the Kia Connect service and over the air infotainment updates.

The 2.2 turbodiesel goes nicely, with big grunt off idle and through the midrange that makes for completely effortless progress in the higher gears, even when fully loaded. It responds strongly and immediately to the pedal and can hold its own with Europe's best diesel engines.

Eco/Comfort/Sport/Smart (adaptive) drive modes are provided, but Sport is not at all sporty, just a touch busier.

The eight-speed dual clutch transmission works almost as smoothly as a torque convertor automatic, and is used to improve fuel efficiency.

Which it does. The test car used 6.5-7.0L/100km on the highway; expect 8-10L/100km in town.

The hybrid is a great option for those prepared to splash out, sipping around 6L/100km while providing smooth, seamless thrust.

The PHEV is trickier to recommend mainly because of its hefty price premium.

Handling is surprisingly taut and tidy for nearly two tonnes, with disciplined body control and secure roadholding from the firm, fixed rate suspension, complimented by quality Continental tyres. The ride is controlled, compliant and comfortable. Steering is typical big SUV though in that it lacks feel and precision.

Sorento is loaded with safety tech, including preventing a rear door from being opened if a cyclist is approaching, AEB that works at intersections, adaptive cruise and an airbag between the front seats. However the curtain airbags do not extend to row three.

Up front, a 12.3 inch infotainment screen sits atop the dash. Unfortunately, it's too far away to reach easily, the menu layout is complex and stand alone voice control is not provided.

All rows of seats in Sport Plus grade get USB connectors, cupholders and storage, and in its cabin layout Sorento is one of more spacious, practical seven seaters around. There's lots of (adjustable) legroom in the 60/40 split fold second row, plus adjustable back rest angle, and all you have to do to for access to row three is push a button, though the gap for access is still tight.

Vents are provided for each row, and row three in Sport Plus also has fan control.

Row three seats are fine for kids up to teen age. They are manually raised from the floor with a strap. A power tailgate accesses a large cargo bay in five seater mode, and a full size spare is under the floor.

If you're after a full-size seven seater, put Sorento on your test drive list. Either the diesel or hybrid drivetrains are the pick. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Good value, especially the diesel
- ✔ Diesel provides effortless, frugal performance
- ✔ Spacious cabin
- ✔ Well equipped with convenience and safety features
- ✔ Excellent quality and reliability
- ✔ Long warranty

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Infotainment is overly complex and distracting to use on the move
- ✘ Expensive servicing
- ✘ Numb steering

SPEX (Sport Plus diesel)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.2-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/eight-speed dual clutch automatic/all-wheel drive
- 148kW of power at 3800rpm/440Nm of torque from 1750-2750rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 5.3L/100km highway; 7.4L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 159gkm; fuel tank is 67 litres
- Max towing weight: 2000kg
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, lane keeping, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, rear cross traffic alert, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, navigation, digital radio, 8 x USB sockets, part leather upholstery, heated front seats, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 65%; 5yr: 52%

compare with ...

Hyundai Santa Fe, Toyota Kluger, Mitsubishi Outlander, Nissan Pathfinder

KIA **EV9** FROM **$97,000**

Kia's EV9, a seven-seater EV wagon, starts at a whopping $97,000 for the EV9 Air, with a single 160kW/350Nm electric motor driving the rear wheels, powered by a 76.1kWh battery. Claimed maximum range is 443km.

A dual electric motor drivetrain, with a claimed 283kW/700Nm and a range of up to 512km from its 99.8kWh battery, starts at $106,500 for the EV9 Earth, tested here. GT Line, the performance variant, will take you 505km, reach 100km/h in 5.3 seconds, and costs $121,000.

This is a spacious, comfortable SUV that larger families will find ticks nearly all the boxes. It's a 2-3-2 layout, with plenty of room in each row, including the rear thanks to adjustable row two seats, easy access to all seats and a big boot. Kids will love the airy, bright cabin and good vision through large windows.

All seats except the middle of row two get a USB C connector, there's a second air-conditioning unit and vents in the roof above row two and a 240 volt outlet allows for appliances to be powered, or devices charged, by the car's battery.

Performance from the dual motor EV9 Earth is strong, swift and almost silent. It feels quicker to 100km/h than the claimed 6.0 seconds, and in Sport mode the Kia really rockets away from rest, or when you put your foot down to overtake.

Its claimed 512 of range is certainly achievable in town, where adjustable regenerative braking can add extra distance, but on the highway, where the test car returned 22-24kWh per 100km, you're looking at more like 400km.

The Earth weighs in at a tank-like 2552kg, so it would be a big mistake to arrive at a corner too fast, but well-tuned suspension and a low, centred mass give it relatively benign handling, planted roadholding and a supple, luxurious ride.

The driver gets a firm, supportive seat, however the head restraint protrudes too far forward. A huge combination screen contains touch infotainment, air con controls (partly obscured by the steering wheel) and instruments, the former requiring a great deal of time and effort to learn your way around.

A major issue with the EV9 is the ridiculous level of nanny safety tech designed to elicit a Pavlov's Dog-like reaction from the driver.

Every time you creep over the speed limit, for example, you get several warning chimes and a flashing limit light on the dash. If you take your eyes off the road to find something on the infotainment screen — which, being so big and complex, takes a while — you get a different flashing light on the dash and more strident chimes, thanks to a camera that watches you as you drive.

When you park, an orchestra of noises, flashing lights and "Collision!" warnings erupt if you get close to another car. Which, y'know, does sometimes happen when you're parking…

The lane keeping system sees the EV9 weave a snake-like path up the road because it can't keep the car centred in the lane, and if you try to steer straight it wants to have an argument, constantly tugging at the wheel.

Most of these systems can be modified or turned off, but you have to do it via a dive into the infotainment menus *every time* you start the car.

So you will just have to submit and obey its commands, or be driven slowly out of your mind.

The EV9 is a well-executed, if pricey, seven seater EV, albeit one that you may come to wish would just shut up and let you drive. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Spacious, well-designed cabin for seven
- ✔ Comfortable seating
- ✔ Long range and strong, smooth EV performance
- ✔ Planted roadholding and a supple ride
- ✔ Seven years warranty

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Complex, confusing infotainment
- ✘ The array of audible and visual warnings will drive you to distraction
- ✘ Overpriced
- ✘ Front seat head restraints protrude too far forward
- ✘ No spare, just a repair kit

SPEX (Earth)

- Made in South Korea
- Dual electric motor/99.8kWh battery/single-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 283kW of power/700Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 6.0 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum range 512km
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB with intersection assist, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, blind spot monitoring, driver attention monitoring, 360 degree cameras, matrix LED headlights, 12.3 inch infotainment, navigation, wired Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, six USB C chargers, 240 volt outlet, three zone air, heated and ventilated front seats, power tailgate, 19 inch alloys, no spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Hyundai Ioniq 9, Volvo EX90, Mercedes-Benz EQS SUV

KIA **TASMAN** FROM **$42,990**

The Kia Tasman broadly matches big name ute rivals with its pricing, which starts at $42,990 for the 4x2 S model. The 4x4 variant is $49,990 and shares its equipment, which includes cloth seats, 17-inch steel wheels, adaptive cruise control, an electronic brake controller, smart key entry, dual 12.3-inch screens and dual-zone ventilation.

The SX ($54,490) picks up alloys, driver-selectable terrain modes (Snow, Sand and Mud) and satellite-navigation.

The SX+ ($62,390) adds 18-inch alloys, ambient lighting, some faux leather trim, rear air vents, a wireless phone charger, 240V AC power outlets and a plastic tub liner.

The next two models get a different front bumper for a more aggressive look and better off-road performance.

The X-Line sells from $67,990 and gets tinted windows, 360-degree camera, heated front seats, powered driver's seat, full synthetic leather trim and a small storage tub above the right rear wheel arch.

The X-Pro is $74,990 and takes more of an off-road flavour, adding 17-inch alloys with all-terrain tyres, heated rear seats, sunroof, heated steering wheel, Harman Kardon audio, additional off-road data in the infotainment screen as well as a more advanced ground view mode for the forward-facing cameras. An X-Trek mode brings off-road cruise control while there's a Rock mode as part of the off-road programs.

All are powered by a 2.2-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel and eight-speed automatic. The familiar engine has upgraded cooling fans to cope with the rigours of low-speed off-road work. It's indicative of the efforts Kia has gone to to ensure the Tasman is ready to work.

The 154kW of power is on the money with four-cylinder rivals, but the 440Nm of torque is at least 10 per cent lower than key competitors.

It's pulls strongly from low in its rev range, but there are times when hill climbing when it drops down a gear.

At the time of writing we'd sampled the Tasman predominantly on gravel and rough tracks.

Ground clearance on the X-Pro model we drove is an excellent 252mm.

That gives it genuine 4WD credentials, though getting in can be a bit of a climb unless you've ticked the sidesteps that are an option across the range.

The Tasman rides firmly; it's not punishing, but you'll feel the bumps. Leaf sprung rear suspension can occasionally kick over bumps.

That said, it's solid and disposes of those thumps confidently.

The Tasman has some sensible off-road hardware, including a locking rear differential.

The part-time four-wheel drive system also offers the best of both worlds for the X-Pro. Drive it in rear-wheel drive for simplicity or 4A for added on-road traction. 4H and 4L lock the front-to-rear drive split to 50/50 for added traction on slippery surfaces.

The selection process is easy, too, taking just a few seconds.

While there's been heated debate about the exterior design, there are no qualms with the spacious cabin, which has recycled plastics with some flecks to break up the grey as well as a mesh-like pattern across the grille.

A thumb wheel for the volume sits in the centre of the dash and there are toggle switches to adjust the fan speed. A sensible selection of buttons and dials on the steering wheel adds to the functionality.

With the gear selector moved to a wand on the steering column (lesser models have a traditional shifter) there's a sizeable binnacle with dual wireless phone chargers and a pair of large cupholders.

There are dual gloveboxes and the seatback pockets in the rear are made of a wetsuit-like mesh with zips to keep things hidden. Pouches higher on the backs of the front seats are perfect for phones.

The seat base can be slid forward to allow for a more relaxed seatback angle.

The load area is broad and Ford Ranger-style steps in the corners of the rear bumper make it easier to climb into it.

Early signs are that the Tasman's off-road performance will be at the pointy end of the ute field. If it can back up the promising cabin design with durability, the Tasman could be a dark horse in a fast-evolving ute segment. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Spacious cabin with logical controls and quality finishes
- ✔ Adjustable angle on back seats is great for comfort
- ✔ Great off-road credentials
- ✔ Long seven-year warranty

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Engine is circa-10-per-cent down on torque compared with prime rivals
- ✘ Prices aren't super sharp
- ✘ Utes aren't supposed to be pretty, but...
- ✘ Unlimited kilometre warranty limited to 150,000km if you use the car for commercial purposes

SPEX (Tasman X-Pro)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.2-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel, 8-speed automatic
- 154kW of power/440Nm of torque
- Claimed max range: xxxkm
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: xx airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, sunroof, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, 17-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: NA; 5yr: NA

compare with ...

Ford Ranger, Toyota Hilux, Mazda BT-50, Isuzu D-Max, Nissan Navara, GWM Cannon, LDV T60, Volkswagen Amarok

LAND ROVER **DEFENDER** FROM **$92,626**

DEFENDER
896 EKU

The first-generation Land Rover reached the end of the line in 2016 after a 68-year run.

But times — and safety regulations — change and the badge has now been revived on a heavy-duty — especially in the price department — luxury off-roader with rugged looks.

A 21 model line-up is available with three (short wheelbase 90) and five door (110 wagon) body styles, plus an eight seater 130 wagon and 2.0-litre four-cylinder or 3.0-litre in-line six-cylinder turbopetrol and turbodiesel engines, each in several states of tune. There's also a 5.0-litre supercharged V8 petrol.

An eight-speed automatic transmission is paired to a dual range transfer case and permanent all-wheel-drive.

Prices are an eye-watering $93,907 to $317,592 for the petrol models, and $92,626 to $157,224 for the diesel variants.

And that's before options are added. The brochure has one page listing all model grades and engines, one page for standard equipment — and 18 pages of options.

We tested the 110 P400, a mid-grade model.

The Defender 110 P400 "mild hybrid" is powered by a 294kW/550Nm turbocharged inline 3.0-litre six. Mild hybrid is a form of electric assistance for the turbopetrol engine. The vehicle cannot operate on electricity alone.

The "five-plus-two" seat layout (Land Rover stops short of calling it a seven-seater because there really is only room in the back for kids), includes a sliding second row of seats to ensure second and third row passengers can maximise their legroom.

The square graphic or "floating pillar" between the back door and the rear of the new Defender has a dual purpose. On the inside, the panels provide additional interior storage for passengers in the second row of seats.

On the outside, the panels provide a mounting point for the Defender's accessories, which include an extendable roof ladder.

Defender's appearance is deceiving; it's quite a large vehicle, longer bumper to bumper than a Land Rover Discovery.

Its off-road clearance numbers are impressive, with class-leading wading depth (850 to 900mm depending on the suspension package) and better approach and departure angles than a Jeep Wrangler.

Air suspension can be raised for off-road driving and, if the car gets stuck, it will lift its body another 75mm to scramble out.

There are six driving modes plus four settings that enable the driver to configure differential operation, throttle response and steering feel.

Although it has genuine off-road credentials, the Defender handles the open road and the daily grind with ease and comfort.

It has the pace of a Porsche Cayenne and (on the right tyres) the cornering ability of a BMW X5.

The 3.0-litre turbo petrol engine is smooth and perky and has seemingly endless reserves of oomph, though it's thirsty, recording mid teens in town.

The eight-speed automatic transmission is well calibrated with smooth and intuitive shifts.

Defender can legally tow its claimed 3500kg maximum weight at GVM of 3165kg (including towball download). Gross Combined Mass is 6665kg.

Even on patchwork roads, the suspension does an excellent job of dispatching the bumps.

Electric power steering is well-weighted, and responsive. Defender drives with the precision of a smaller SUV, even though it weighs 2.3-2.4 tonnes.

Overall, the new Defender is an impressive feat of engineering. The reliability issues that have plagued Land Rovers for decades, and seem to show no signs of being resolved, are a major disincentive to ownership, though. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★⯪☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Classy blend of retro and modern looks
- ✔ Effortless power
- ✔ Good road-holding on bitumen
- ✔ Epic off-road ability

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Pricey
- ✘ Expensive options, too, some of which should be standard at the price
- ✘ Land Rover reliability baggage

SPEX (110 P400)

- Made in Slovakia
- 3.0-litre in line six cylinder turbopetrol/eight-speed automatic/dual range 4x4
- 294kW of power at 5500rpm/550Nm of torque from 2000-5000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.1 seconds (claimed)
- 8.4L/100km highway; 12.4L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 235gkm; fuel tank is 90 litres
- Maximum towing weight 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, autonomous emergency braking, adaptive cruise, blind zone warning, rear cross-traffic alert, lane-keeping assistance, tyre pressure monitors, speed-sign recognition, a 360-degree camera, dual zone air, digital radio, Apple Car Play, Android Auto, 10-inch infotainment touchscreen, LED headlights and 20 inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 79%; 5yr: 72%

compare with ...

Ford Everest, Ineos Grenadier, Lexus LX, Nissan Patrol, Toyota 300 Series Landcruiser

LDV **T60 MAX** FROM **$45,253**

The LDV T60 arrived in Australia in 2017 and was the first ute from China to score a five-star ANCAP safety rating.

It quickly found homes in suburban driveways — delivering record sales year-on-year — thanks to sharp prices and long equipment lists.

But the game moved on — with stronger and newer competition, including from fellow Chinese brand Great Wall Motors — and LDV had to up the ante.

The latest update in early 2025 included driver-assist systems previously missing, such as the now mandatory autonomous emergency braking (AEB).

Other tech included radar cruise control, lane departure warning and lane keep assist.

Despite this, the T60 is officially unrated by ANCAP given the current generation's test is more than six years old, meaning it has expired.

A mid-life facelift in the second half of 2021 brought the current front-end appearance, a revised dash and infotainment system, and the twin-turbo 2.0-litre four-cylinder diesel engine to replace the old underpowered 2.8.

LDV also put a spanner on the suspension and switched tyre suppliers in response to feedback about lacklustre roadholding.

For 2025, a three-model line-up is standard with an eight-speed automatic and a part time dual range four-wheel-drive system.

Drive away prices for private buyers start at $45,253 for the Pro. Max Plus is $52,095, while the long wheelbase Max Plus, with an extended 'Mega' tub, is $53,674.

Maximum towing capacity is up 500kg to 3500kg.

The cabin now has a 10.25-inch infotainment screen — retaining AM/FM and Apple CarPlay but without Android Auto or digital radio connectivity, as before.

It does get a high definition reversing camera with the latest update.

The LDV T60 Max retains six airbags, tyre pressure monitors, and despite more advanced safety aids it still lacks blind spot monitoring, lane-centring technology and speed sign recognition.

Such features are standard on utes such as the Toyota HiLux, Ford Ranger, Isuzu D-Max, Mazda BT-50 and GWM Ute.

The twin-turbo 2.0-litre diesel four-cylinder produces 160kW at 4000rpm — and 500Nm between 1500 and 2400rpm — shadowing the numbers of the diesel engines in established utes such as the Toyota HiLux 2.8 (150kW/500Nm) and Ford Ranger 2.0 (157kW/500Nm).

We ran 0 to 100km/h numbers to sample the difference. The LDV T60 Max did the 0 to 100km/h dash in 9.8 seconds on our timing equipment — lineball with the Toyota Ranger and Toyota HiLux.

The suspension feels more taut than before, recovering well from speed bumps and imperfections in the road.

Despite being an all-new design, the twin-turbo engine is noisy and has a narrow power band. It's also thirsty, despite its smaller capacity.

On our test loop — comprising of favourable inter-urban and freeway driving — the LDV T60 Max hovered between 8.5 and 9.5L/100km with the six-speed auto.

The eight-speed ZF transmission shifts predictively enough but is not the smoothest operator.

The LDV T60 Max is a step forward for this emerging brand. however, while it has maintained its price advantage — undercutting the big players by $10,000 to $20,000 (depending on the variant) — it falls short in terms of refinement, on-road manners and advanced safety tech now considered the norm.

We should also note that if you fancy paying silly money for Australia's first EV ute, the eT60 is all yours for $92,990. It runs an 88.55kWh battery that delivers a claimed 330km of range. Payload is 1000kg and max towing weight is also 1000kg. Why would you? ■

STARS ★★⯪☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★⯪☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯪☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★⯪☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Cheap
- ✔ Decent performance
- ✔ OK handling, too
- ✔ Plenty of space in the cabin and tub
- ✔ 4x4 capability

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Off the pace safety-wise, despite previous (expired) five star ANCAP rating
- ✘ Noisy and a bit thirsty
- ✘ Narrow power band
- ✘ Reliability and resale yet to be proven

SPEX (Pro auto)

- Made in China
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder twin turbodiesel/eight-speed auto/part time 4x4
- 160kW of power at 4000rpm/500Nm of torque from 1500-2400rpm
- 0-100km/h in 9.8 seconds
- 7.9L/100m highway; 11.5L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 244gkm; fuel tank is 73 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/130,000km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, 10.25 inch touchscreen, Apple CarPlay, two USBs, cloth upholstery, LED headlights rain sensing wipers, spray on tub liner, 17-inch alloy wheels, full size steel spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 59%; 5yr: 49%

compare with ...

GWM Cannon, Ssangyong Musso, Mitsubishi Triton

LEAPMOTOR **C10** FROM **$43,888**

One of many new brands out of China, Leapmotor also has the muscle of Stellantis behind it. For those who need a refresher, Stellantis is essentially the merger of Peugeot-Citroen and Fiat-Chrysler, also incorporating brands such as Jeep and Maserati.

But Leapmotor is about barging in on the growing EV market with a price-focused offering designed to turn heads.

The C10 is the brand's first arrival, a mid-sized SUV available as a pure battery electric vehicle or as a range extender hybrid, which gets a smaller battery but a petrol engine to extend the range.

The C10 is priced from $43,888 for the Style range extender — or REEV — or $45,888 for the EV. Each comes with 18-inch alloy wheels, 360-degree camera, wireless phone charging, panoramic sunroof, dual-zone climate control, power adjustable front seats, a 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster and 14.6-inch infotainment touchscreen.

There's no key, with either a near-field communication card or the ability to use your phone as the key. Over-the-air software updates reinforce the tech focus.

Curiously, though, there's no Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity, which some will certainly miss. Sure, Tesla does the same thing, but Tesla also does a better job with embedded apps and native smartphone integration.

The C10 also has a long list of active safety gear, including autonomous braking, blind spot monitoring, driver monitoring, rear cross traffic alert and various lane keep assist systems.

All are covered by a seven-year, 160,000km warranty, with the battery pack covered for eight years.

The Design ($47,888 as a REEV or $49,888 as an EV) adds imitation leather, heated steering wheel, powered tailgate, heated and ventilated front seats and 20-inch wheels.

For now we've only driven the pure EV version, which is powered by a 160kW/320Nm electric motor driving the rear wheels. It gets a 69.9kWh battery that provides a claimed 420km of range.

The REEV drops the battery capacity to 28.4kWh but adds a 1.5-litre four-cylinder engine. The maximum power is also down by 2kW, to 158kW in total.

Inside, the C10 is suitably spacious, both front and rear. A flat floor in the back maximises foot space while the 60/40 split-fold back seats allow for larger items in the already-roomy luggage area.

Up front, it's all about the tech rather than buttons.

Other than window switches and Tesla-inspired thumbwheels and touchpads on the steering wheel it's devoid of physical buttons, instead packing everything into the central infotainment screen.

That screen takes some familiarisation with swiping, tapping and filtering your way through apps and menus.

You'll have to get used to that screen to disable some of the driver aids, which can be too eager to beep and steer when you don't want them to. Hopefully a software update will address that.

On the road, the electric performance is thoroughly acceptable. Acceleration is smooth and effortless and while it's not about to upset the EV establishment there's enough thrust for suburban duties.

At freeway speeds it's less enthusiastic but is still adequate.

Less impressive is the way it deals with everyday imperfections.

The steering lacks feel and the suspension can jiggle around over repeated bumps.

It's fairly cushy but lacks the sense of security some of the better SUVs deliver in spades.

All of which points to space and value as the standouts for the C10.

With prices hovering below key rivals it's a way to make the EV leap (sorry...) without splashing out big bucks.. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★⯪☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Sharp EV pricing
- ✔ Spacious body
- ✔ Brimming with tech and safety gear

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ No Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity
- ✘ Suspension struggles with bumps and corners
- ✘ Performance only adequate

SPEX (C10 Design EV)

- Made in China
- Engine/motor details here
- 160kW of power/320Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.5 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 420km
- Warranty: Seven years/160,000km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, ambient lighting, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 59%; 5yr: 42%

compare with ...

BYD Atto 3, MG ZS EV, Hyundai Kona Electric, GWM Ora, Geely EX5

LEXUS **UX** FROM **$55,370**

Based on Toyota's "New Global Architecture" that also underpins the closely related C-HR and Corolla, the Lexus UX (for Urban Explorer) slots in beneath the NX, though it's really less a pure SUV than a hatch-on-stilts, Mercedes GLA-style.

For 2025, Lexus has dropped the petrol-only versions, with the UX now hybrid or electric only, starting with the $55,370 UX300h Luxury.

Even the base model is generously equipped, with navigation, a huge display screen, digital radio, LED headlights, powered steering column, heated front seats, keyless entry/start and adaptive cruise control.

Next up is the $62,320 Sports Luxury, adding 18-inch alloys with runflat tyres (so no spare), leather, vented front seats, upgraded audio, better camera and jazzier trim.

An all-wheel-drive Sports Luxury is $70,520.

The F Sport, at $63,110 — or $73,210 with all-wheel-drive —scores a body kit, racier front seats, steering wheel and cabin trimmings, adaptive dampers and "Active Sound Control" for a fruitier exhaust note.

While the low-slung UX might seem tight inside, the cabin is deceptively roomy front and rear, with supportive seating for four (or five at a squeeze), an excellent driving position, modern, distinctive dash layout, high-quality fittings and pleasing attention to detail. The instruments are multi-configurable too — though Lexus' touchpad controller can be infuriatingly fiddly. Where space is limited is behind the seats, due to a pitifully shallow boot.

The UX300e EV, with a 72.8kWh battery delivering up to a claimed 560km of range, costs $80,720 in Luxury spec or $88,190 in Sports Luxury.

In contrast, the UX250h — which combines the 2.0-litre engine with two electric motors and a different type of CVT — is livelier off the line, quicker through the mid-range and more economical to boot, while providing an altogether sweeter and quieter operation.

We're also hesitant to recommend the top-line F Sport unless you only travel along ultra-smooth roads, because — despite trick adaptive damper tech — the suspension can become harsh and loud, even over moderate bumps. The fact is, with regular rather than runflat tyres, the base Luxury's standard 17-inch wheel/tyre set-up is the best compromise if comfort is your priority.

Still, the UX can be a rewarding drive thanks to precise steering, sharp handling and secure, controlled and surefooted roadholding.

Overall, the littlest Lexus crossover is a reasonable drive, but remember, it is very grade-dependent. Take a test drive in Toyota's C-HR and Corolla Cross hybrids, too. They are from the same family, but at much lower prices because they wear a Toyota badge. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★½☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Premium cabin
- ✔ Striking design
- ✔ UX300h's performance, refinement and economy
- ✔ Involving steering and handling
- ✔ Quality craftsmanship

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Ride on F-Sport is too firm, too noisy
- ✘ Noisy, rowdy engine in UX200
- ✘ No spare wheel on Sport Luxury and F-Sport grades
- ✘ Fiddly multimedia touchpad
- ✘ Shallow boot
- ✘ No Apple CarPlay/Android Auto connectivity

SPEX (UX300h Luxury)

- Made in Japan
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder petrol-electric hybrid/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 146kW of power (combined)/202Nm of torque
- 4.4L/100km country, 4.0L/100km city, regular unleaded, fuel tank is 43L, CO2 emissions are 99gm
- Warranty: five years, unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise with stop/go, lane keep assist, traffic sign recognition, auto high beam, blind-spot monitor, rear cross-traffic alert, parking sensors, camera, tyre-pressure monitoring, digital radio, LED headlights, power-adjustable steering column, powered and heated front seats, leather, roof rails, 17-inch alloys, space-saver spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 73%; 5yr: 59%

compare with ...

Audi Q3, BMW X1, Mercedes-Benz GLA, Volvo XC40, Mini Countryman

LEXUS **NX** FROM **$63,400**

The second generation Lexus NX makes several steps forward in terms of a more user-friendly infotainment system and advanced safety aids across the range.

Build quality inside and out — as well as the overall presentation of the vehicle — remain first-class.

There's also more room in the cabin and cargo hold than before, plus a greater choice of drivetrain options — including a plug-in hybrid. Under the skin it shares architecture and mechanicals with the Toyota RAV4, though a couple of variants are bespoke.

NX prices start from $63,400 for the base NX250 and rise to $95,900 for the NX450+ F Sport hybrid AWD

The NX250 front-wheel drive is powered by a non-turbo 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol (with 152kW of power and 243Nm of torque), NX350 AWD uses a 2.4-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol (205kW/430Nm), NX350h (front and all-wheel drive) uses a non-turbo 2.5-litre four-cylinder paired to hybrid electric power (179kW/torque not listed) and NX450h AWD runs a non-turbo 2.5-litre four-cylinder paired to plug-in hybrid electric power (227kW/torque not listed).

An eight-speed auto is standard in petrol only models; hybrids use a CVT.

We test drove the perky NX350 F Sport 2.4 turbo petrol/AWD variant ($79,343), plus the flagship NX450 plug-in hybrid.

Lexus's fuel consumption claim of just 1.3L/100km in the plug-in hybrid variant is laughable and highlights how misleading the "official" rating label figures can be when derived from laboratory tests.

We drove with a mix of pure battery power and pure petrol power, so our readout of 7L/100km was moot.

The volume selling NX350h regular hybrid (as in, the non-plug-in model) should deliver real-world economy close to 5.5L/100km, similar to the Toyota RAV4 Hybrid which uses the same drivetrain.

Lexus claims the NX plug-in hybrid has the longest electric-only driving range in the plug-in hybrid SUV class — 87km on a full charge — before the petrol engine kicks in.

The Lexus 450h+ is zippy, silent, and efficient in this guise. But if you're lazy and don't recharge it regularly, you will end up with a higher fuel bill thanks to the heavy lithium-ion battery pack (18.1kWh) which pushes the weight of this model beyond two tonnes.

Like its predecessor, as a drive the new NX is the least convincing vehicle in the Lexus line-up.

It is quiet and relatively refined, but the steering is too light and vague and the suspension feels unusually lumpy over bumps, perhaps exaggerated by the adoption of runflat tyres which tend to have stiff sidewalls.

We suspect part of the problem with the Lexus NX is also the push for ever larger wheel and tyre combinations.

Twenty-inch alloys look good in the brochure and in the showroom, but on bumpy tarmac — in the suburbs or on backroads — the Lexus NX feels like it's clomping around in shoes that are too big for it.

In an attempt to deliver a luxurious ride, the suspension has been tuned too soft and the steering is too vague.

Our driving assessment was on a familiar road test loop — not a road mapped out by the manufacturer — and it took some of the shine off the car.

We were hoping this second generation model would feel like the Lexus NX had gone to finishing school. Alas, it still has plenty of homework to do.

To be frank, the Toyota RAV4 — on which the Lexus NX is based — feels better to drive. And it is, of course, tens of thousands of dollars cheaper to buy. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Sharp design inside and out
- ✔ Improved functionality of the infotainment system
- ✔ Superb build quality
- ✔ Hybrid fuel-efficiency
- ✔ Loaded with safety tech

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Doesn't feel as capable or comfortable as a Lexus should
- ✘ RAV4 is better to drive and costs a lot less
- ✘ Vague steering
- ✘ Lumpy ride, in part due to runflat tyres
- ✘ Non-hybrid models are pretty thirsty, on premium unleaded

SPEX (NX450h+)

- Made in Japan
- 2.4-litre petrol four-cylinder plug-in hybrid/electric motor/18.1kWh battery/CVT
- 227kW of power/No torque figure given
- 0-100km/h in 6.3 seconds (claimed)
- Combined fuel consumption 1.3L/100km; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 29gkm
- Maximum electric only range: 87 km (claimed)
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: 10 airbags, stability control, forward and reverse AEB, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, lane keeping, steering assist, safe exit assist, voice control, navigation, digital radio, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, wireless phone charging, power tailgate, sunroof, ventilated front seats, heated front and rear seats, leather, automatic parking, adaptive LED headlights, 20-inch alloys, runflats
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 82%; 5yr: 70%

compare with ...

BMW X3, Audi Q5, Mercedes-Benz GLC, Volvo XC60, Genesis GV70

LEXUS **RX** FROM **$90,350**

The fifth generation Lexus RX range opens with the RX350h Luxury, at $90,350, with a 184kW 2.4-litre turbopetrol/series parallel hybrid electric/CVT/rear wheel drivetrain. It's $93,700 with AWD and Sports Luxury specification is $106,950.

F-Sport, tested here at $100,950, runs a 205kW/430Nm 2.4-litre turbopetrol engine matched with an eight-speed automatic and all-wheel drive. The Sports Luxury variant is $113,600.

RX500h F-Sport Performance has a 273kW 2.4-litre turbopetrol/ parallel hybrid electric/six-speed automatic/all-wheel drivetrain, priced at $127,700.

RZ450e Luxury is $121,059 and RZ450e Sports Luxury is $133,059.

Prices include a single-phase 7kW home wallcharger, supplied and installed by Jet Charge.

Owning a Lexus has often been a much more satisfying experience than driving it, but the pure petrol-powered 2.4-litre turbo RX350 F Sport is certainly an engaging drive compared with its vanilla predecessors.

The 2.4's 205kW is just enough to do the job in the two tonne F Sport, and although its 430Nm of grunt is produced from a low 1700rpm, and there are now eight ratios in the automatic, it does take a moment (or two) to get mobile; once you're up and rolling, there's solid midrange shove and a useful, if slightly strained, top end. The 0-100km/h trip takes a claimed 7.6 seconds.

Handling, too, is more poised and responsive than previously. A stiffer body, wider tracks and sportier suspension — with adaptive dampers that can be adjusted via Normal, Sport and Custom menus — contribute to greater athleticism and better balance in corners, while six piston front brake calipers and and precise, reasonably tactile steering complement the F Sport's improved on road abilities.

Despite 21-inch alloys, ride comfort is excellent. The F-Sport works particularly well on our goat track country roads and is a real pleasure to drive long distances. It's also very quiet — a Lexus signature.

Inside, the driver gets a bespoke F-Sport seat that's firm, well bolstered, heated/cooled and luxuriously comfortable. There's lots of steering wheel and seat travel, so tall drivers fit nicely. Back seat comfort and space are also first class.

The cabin presentation is also top notch, with beautiful finishes and attention to detail. Fit and finish are among the best in the luxury class.

A hands free power tailgate accesses a decent sized load area, with extra storage under the floor. There's no spare, just a repair kit.

RX is arguably the most advanced SUV on the market in terms of driver assist safety tech, which includes motorcycle detection at intersections and in adjacent lanes and automatic speed reduction if you're on cruise control and get into a corner too fast.

A stylish, all digital dash includes a huge 14-inch infotainment touchscreen that's easy to use and plenty of storage. Soft touch steering wheel controls for audio and cruise control require some familiarisation. Internal and external door handles operate with a light touch, too.

On the road, this RX — at least in 350 F Sport specification — is a much more convincing drive than its predecessors. It's also had big (as in $15,000-plus) price hikes, up into Audi, BMW and Mercedes territory, so Lexus needed to lift its game. It has. Put it on your test drive list. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★⯪
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Now drives as good as it looks
- ✔ Superb quality and reliability
- ✔ Best in the business customer service
- ✔ Loaded with gear
- ✔ Very comfortable seating and ride
- ✔ Pointy end driver assist safety tech

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Hefty price hikes
- ✘ Weighs a bit too, so it's on the thirsty side
- ✘ 2.4 is just enough engine
- ✘ Steering wheel controls take a while to master
- ✘ No spare

SPEX (350 F-Sport)

- Made in Japan
- 2.4-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/ eight-speed auto/all-wheel drive
- 205kW of power at 6000rpm/430Nm of torque from 1700-3600rpm
- 0-100km/h in 7.6 seconds (claimed)
- 7.1L/100km highway; 11.5L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 197gkm; fuel tank is 68 litres
- Max towing weight 1500kg
- Warranty: five years, unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, emergency steering assist, lane keep assist, head up display, 14-inch touchscreen, navigation, voice control, digital radio, wired Android Auto, wireless Apple CarPlay, 5 x USB C ports, leather-faced, heated and cooled sports front seats, sunroof, hands free power tailgate, 21 inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 69%; 5yr: 51%

compare with ...

BMW X5, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Volvo XC90, Genesis GV80, Audi Q7

LEXUS **RZ** FROM **$121,675**

The Lexus RZ 450e is the first Toyota-engineered dedicated EV to land in Australia (the UX300e was based on a petrol platform).

Similar in size to the RX petrol/electric hybrid, you pay a hefty premium for pure EV power. Prices start at $121,059 for Luxury grade; Sports Luxury is $133,059. RX starts at $90,350.

Powering the RZ is a 71.4kWh battery that Lexus claims will still be capable of 90 per cent capacity retention after 10 years. Electric motors on front and rear axles have combined outputs of 230kW and 435Nm, and in Sport mode the RZ can reach 100km/h from rest in a rapid 5.3 seconds.

Maximum claimed driving range is a claimed 470km, but that's according to the outdated Australian standard. In the real world, expect closer to 350km in Normal mode. Range mode will extend this a little, while Sport mode will reduce it.

A three-year subscription to the Chargefox network, plus a 7kW AC JetCharge wallbox charger (including installation) are included in the price. The JetCharger will juice up the battery from 10 percent to full in about 6.5 hours. A 150kW DC charging system also allows charging to 80 per cent in 30 minutes, but Lexus recommends minimising the use of fast charging, advising that it can "impact" (that's code for "hurt") battery performance and durability.

RZ is a great drive, with immediate, effortless thrust when you put your foot down, completely smooth, silent operation and the advantage of split-second adjustment of torque distribution, not only between axles but between individual wheels. Some ICE (Internal Combustion Engine) SUVs can do this too, but in an EV the drive splits are adjusted much quicker and more precisely. It virtually eliminates understeer and oversteer when cornering.

Also helping advance the EV handling cause is completely different weight distribution. In most ICE vehicles, there's an imbalance between front and rear and a relatively high centre of gravity, with a massive lump of metal (the engine/transmission) sitting high in the nose. RZ's motive mass (the battery and electric motors) is concentrated low — mostly under the floor — and in the centre, which promotes neutral, responsive steering and handling. Lexus backs this up with non-adjustable but tightly-controlled suspension, so at speed the RZ is surprisingly capable, poised and securely planted, in a similar fashion to the all-wheel drive versions of Kia's EV6 and Hyundai's Ioniq5. Ride comfort is also excellent.

Inside, it's a big five seater with all the luxe and safety tech you would expect, but nmo glovebox! "Vegan upholstery" — I kid you not — feels like silken-soft leather, and the front seats are sumptuous and supportive, with heating as well. There's lots of back seat legroom and a comfortable bench, but the backrest could use a little more upright adjustment. A large boot is accessed via a power tailgate.

The dash is more conventional in style than most EVs, but Lexus continues to make ventilation and infotainment controls more complex than necessary. Five USB C ports are provided. A camera on the steering column spies on you and you are chastised if you take your eyes off the road. Do we really need this crap?

Gratuitous nanny tech aside, the RZ is an impressive EV, albeit at an ambitious price. Kia's dual motor EV6 and Hyundai's Ioniq 5 do everything the Lexus does, lack nothing in terms of safety or luxury, and claim a usefully longer range. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★⯪
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Fast, powerful, smooth performance
- ✔ Excellent dynamics and a compliant ride
- ✔ Spacious cabin
- ✔ Luxurious front seats
- ✔ Lexus quality, reliability and customer service are the best in the business

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Overpriced and no glovebox!
- ✘ Ventilation and infotainment controls are unnecessarily complex
- ✘ The real world range is much shorter than 470km
- ✘ Silly spy camera "safety" tech
- ✘ No spare, just a repair kit

SPEX (Luxury)

- Made in Japan
- Dual motor EV/71.4kWh battery/single-speed transmission/all-wheel drive
- 230kW of power/435Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.3 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum range: 470km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km; eight years/160,000km battery
- Standard: 10 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert and braking, safe exit assist, 360 degree cameras, lane keep assist, 14-inch touchscreen, Panasonic audio, navigation, wireless phone charging and Apple CarPlay, wired Android Auto, five USB-C ports, heated front seats, 18-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 46%; 5yr: 31%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, BMW iX, Mercedes-Benz EQE SUV, Audi Q8 e-tron, Volvo EX90

LEXUS **GX** FROM **$116,000**

The GX is Lexus's answer to the Toyota Prado. Beneath the skin, the two share a core architecture (also shared with the LandCruiser 300-Series) and off-road prowess.

But up top the Lexus has lashings of luxury and a unique — and feisty — turbo V6 petrol engine that adds to its sport character.

Prices kick off at $116,000 for the Luxury model that gets seven seats, faux leather, surround view camera, head-up display, wireless phone charger, powered tailgate, heated front seats, ambient lighting and three years of connected services.

There's also a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster and 14-inch central display. Lexus cleverly integrates two dials to adjust the temperature for each side of the cabin into the lower corners of the screen; it's a nice mix of tech and analogue.

A Sports Luxury ($128,200) adds to that with 22-inch wheels, partial real leather, multi-zone ambient lighting, massaging front seats (they're great), heated steering wheel, side steps that extend automatically, panoramic sunroof, rear blinds, a mini fridge in the centre console and a 21-speaker Mark Levinson audio system.

In between is an Overtrail ($122,250) that is designed to get the tyres dirty, so does without some of the fancy luxury kit. It reverts to 18-inch wheels with off-road tyres and picks up a locking rear differential and E-KDSS suspension that allows better wheel articulation in off-road conditions. There are also black design highlights and a five-seat layout that maximises load space.

The Luxury and Overtrail are rated to tow 3.5 tonnes but the Sports Luxury drops that to 3130kg. In any case, when you're towing at the limit the remaining payload will be modest, so crunch the numbers before hooking up the boat.

While there's a hybrid available overseas, all GXs sold here are for now powered by a 3.5-litre twin turbo engine that makes 260kW and 650Nm. It slurps plenty of premium unleaded in the process. Claimed fuel use is 12.3L/100km and you can expect to use more than that in everyday driving, especially around town; combined with an 80-litre fuel tank it means you'll be refueling regularly.

It's a hearty engine, though, and makes for brisk progress in a 2.5-tonne-plus off-roader. The 10-speed auto suits it nicely, decisively selecting ratios and generally doing a good job of getting the right one.

The engine also sounds purposeful, adding to the character of a four-wheel drive that goes beyond sheer capability. And with so much pulling power low in the rev range it makes for effortless progress when you're not sinking your right foot to the floor.

Speaking of which, the GX impresses in rough terrain, with good ground clearance and excellent traction system to keep things moving. A low-range transfer case multiplies torque for slow speed work. The 22-inch wheel of the Sports Luxury aren't well suited to rocks and sand, though, so it'd pay to go for one of the other model (preferably the Overtrail) if adventuring is in your GX future.

The GX's suspension is also beautifully suited to the cruisy 4WD task. It's comfortable and compliant, setting the scene for a car that pampers its occupants. But by large off-roader standards it's also really well controlled and confident.

Inside, too, the GX is practical and upmarket. But some of the sharper edges endow it with something of a rugged flavour, which works nicely with the butch exterior.

All of which is a big tick for a car that provides Toyota reliability with some Land Rover-esque design muscle.

Sure, it's not cheap, but for those who want more than a Toyota the GX is a terrific alternative to the European luxury badges, many of which won't have anything like the off-road talent of the Lexus. ▪

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★★
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Muscular looks inside and out
✔ Top-shelf build quality and attention to detail
✔ Hearty V6 twin turbo engine
✔ Supple and well controlled suspension

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ V6 engine is thirsty and fuel tank small
✘ Sports Luxury not as adept off-road
✘ Prices are well and truly into luxury territory

SPEX (Luxury)

- Made in Japan
- 3.5-litre V6 twin turbopetrol, 10-speed auto, dual-range transfer case
- 260kW of power/650Nm of torque
- 17.0L/100km city; 9.5L/100km country; CO2 emissions are 279g/km; fuel tank is 80L
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: 9 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, faux leather, power tailgate, heated front seats, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 82%; 5yr: 64%

compare with ...

Land Rover Defender, Toyota Prado, Toyota LandCruiser, BMW X5, Audi Q7, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Porsche Cayenne

LEXUS **LX** FROM **$155,976**

The Lexus LX range copped a $10,000 price hike for 2024 but prices fell marginally in 2025. It's the Toyota 300 Series Landcruiser with bespoke styling inside and out — though the family resemblance is obvious — a big dose of extra bling, best in the business customer service and support with Lexus Encore Platinum, improved refinement and ride comfort due, in part, to specific adaptive suspension tuning and – last but certainly not least – a petrol engine option, no longer available on the 'Cruiser in Australia.

Lexus claims its twin turbopetrol V6 is 3.5 litres, but at 3445cc, it's actually closer to 3.4 litres. Not that this really matters, because with 306kW of power and 650Nm of torque, plus a 10 speed automatic behind it, it shifts the 2640kg LX600 from 0-100km/h in a pretty sprightly seven seconds. Dual range constant all-wheel drive is standard.

The LX lineup opens with the LX500d, priced at $155,976 and powered by the Landcruiser's 227kW/700Nm 3.3-litre twin turbodiesel, also paired with a 10 speed automatic and dual range constant all-wheel drive.

LX500d Sports Luxury grade is $172,976. F Sport is $178,976.

The 3.4-litre turbopetrol-powered LX600 variants add $3500. At the top of the heap sits the 3.4-litre LX600 Ultra Luxury ($217,976), which has no 500d equivalent. It's a four seater; base models are seven seaters and intermediate Sport Luxury and F Sport grades are five seaters.

LX is equally as capable as the 300 Series when it comes to a bit of 4x4 rough and tumble and features up to 130mm of ride height adjustment. It competes with the likes of Range Rover and German rivals such as the Porsche Cayenne, Mercedes GLS, BMW X5/X7 and Audi Q7/Q8.

That said, while the LX is absolutely loaded with luxe, as a drive it's not quite as poised or agile as its competitors, and neither is the ride as smooth and composed on rough roads, because it shares the Landcruiser's body on frame chassis rather than a lighter, more rigid monocoque, plus live rear axle rather than independent rear suspension. It also weighs in at 2.63-2.69 tonnes.

Like the Landcruiser, LX will tow up to 3.5 tonnes, although at 3280kg GVM you won't have much payload left if there's 350kg on the towball. The fuel bills for the LX600 turbopetrol will also be horrendous with such a load. Even unladen, 12-13L/100km on the highway and about 20L/100km in town is a very deep thirst, and expensive on the recommended 95 premium. Tank capacity is 110 litres.

The 3.4 twin turbopetrol is a sweet engine, with excellent responsiveness, decent bottom end torque for a petrol and exceptional refinement. It's smoother and quieter than the turbodiesel, but on balance, the diesel is the better choice on the grounds of fuel economy and, certainly, towing ability. And it makes a much nicer sound, a sort deep burble, almost like a V8.

If we listed every piece of standard equipment and safety tech in the LX, it would take the entire magazine. Suffice to say you don't miss out. In fact there are so many buttons and screens on the dash that trying to find the function you want can leave you dazed and confused compared with the minimalist, all-screen layouts now favoured by European brands.

If diesel is your preference, you should drive the 300 Series as well, for obvious reasons. Luxury spec Cruisers start at $120,991 for the VX and top out at $145,971 for the Sahara ZX. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Smooth, responsive drivetrains
- ✔ Much more off road ability than German rivals
- ✔ Unbeatable customer service and support
- ✔ Made in Japan quality and reliability
- ✔ Strong resale values
- ✔ Huge boot
- ✔ Full size spare

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Overly complex, unco-ordinated dash layout
- ✘ Mediocre handling on the bitumen compared with European rivals
- ✘ Shudders and shakes a bit on rough roads
- ✘ A Landcruiser costs less
- ✘ That grille is an acquired taste

SPEX (LX600)

- Made in Japan
- 3.4-litre V6 twin turbopetrol/10-speed auto/dual range constant 4x4
- 305kW of power at 5200rpm/650Nm of torque from 2000-3600rpm
- 0-100km/h in 7 seconds (claimed)
- 9.4L/100km highway; 16.7L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 275gkm; fuel tank is 100 litres
- Max towing weight 3500kg
- Warranty: five years, unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, adaptive cruise, AEB with turn assist oncoming traffic functionality, blind spot monitoring, 360 degree cameras, emergency steering assist, head up display, rear cross traffic alert, adaptive, adjustable suspension, leather faced upholstery, digital instrumentation, navigation, wireless phone charging, 25 speaker Levinson audio, 20-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 77%; 5yr: 61%

compare with ...

Audi Q7/Q8, BMW X5/X7, Mercedes GLS, Porsche Cayenne, Range Rover

MAHINDRA **XUV700** FROM **$39,990**

Indian automotive giant Mahindra's XUV700 is its most sophisticated offering yet, a big seven-seater SUV that's spacious, stylish and packs the sort of drivetrain, safety, infotainment and luxury that's normally available a long way north of a $39,990 driveaway starting price.

That's the ask for the base AX7 — $3000 more than last year — which features an all-digital dash with dual 10.25 inch instruments and infotainment screens, a full length sunroof, black fake leather upholstery, three zone air and 18-inch alloys. Safety kit includes adaptive cruise, lane keep assist and speed sign recognition.

The AX7-L, at $42,990 driveaway, adds blind spot monitoring, 360 degree cameras, great sounding 12 speaker audio, stop and go in traffic function for the adaptive cruise, wireless phone charging, and silly pop-out electric door handles that are just begging to be ripped off by some bogan lurking in a shopping centre car park.

STARS ★★⯪☆☆

Safety
Not yet rated
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★⯪☆☆

The flagship AX7-L Black Edition, with black exterior and cabin treatment at $43,990 driveaway.

Under the bonnet is a 2.0-litre turbopetrol four, with a hefty 149kW of power and 380Nm of torque, the latter available from just 1750rpm. It's sent to the front wheels via a six speed automatic.

So in terms of size, drivetrain and specification, XUV700's main rivals would be the Toyota Kluger, Ford Everest, Hyundai Santa Fe and Kia Sorento — all of which are at least $10,000 more expensive.

It's most direct rival is the Chinese brand LDV D90 seven seater, priced from $43,147 drive away.

The 2.0-litre launches strongly and smoothly before bogging down a little in the midrange, though this is not a serious issue and it's a smooth, refined and tractable engine that well suits this application. It's a fairly thirsty beast in town, where you can expect consumption in the low teens, on regular unleaded.

The six-speed is fine, though the gaps between ratios are fairly wide, and there are no push button drive modes or paddles.

The cruise control has a weird on-off-on-off operation when going up a moderately steep hill.

XUV's solid unitary construction and independent suspension at both ends look good on paper, but handling at speed is substandard and the softly sprung, underdamped suspension can get loose on a choppy surface, while in tight corners body roll and understeer happen early and often. Steering is overassisted, remote and vague, while the brake pedal feels mushy and the brakes themselves lack power and progression. The ride is comfortable around town, less so on the open road.

On a freeway, the lane keeping function is far too aggressive, to the point where you sometimes have to wrestle with the steering wheel. Blind spot monitoring has no light in the external mirror, rather an image projected onto the instrument panel, which is arguably not particularly useful.

It's a much happier story in the cabin, which is elegantly styled, very well equipped and for the most part easy to live with. The touchscreen is occasionally unresponsive, and there's not much oddment storage, but the front seats are luxurious, the elevated middle row is roomy and comfortable and row three is easy to access via a one touch tumble function for the kerbside section of the middle row. Two young kids will be happy there, and there's even air vents with fan speed adjustment.

Boot space is reasonable in five seater mode, but there's no power assisted tailgate.

Mahindra's XUV700 needs work on a few fronts before its on road competence is as impressive as its packaging and value for money proposition, but the latter is unarguable. Bang for your bucks? Absolutely. ■

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Seven seats for under $40,000
✔ Spacious, stylish cabin
✔ Comfortable seating and easy access to row three
✔ Loaded with safety and infotainment tech
✔ Refined, tractable 2.0-litre turbopetrol
✔ Smooth ride in town

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Sloppy handling on the open road
✘ Cruise control and lane keep assist need recalibration
✘ Brakes lack power and feel
✘ Overassisted steering
✘ Touchscreen can be temperamental
✘ Thirsty in town

SPEX (AX7)

- Made in India
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/six-speed auto/front-wheel drive
- 149kW of power at 5000rpm/380Nm of torque from 1750-3000rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 8.3L/100km combined; 91 regular; fuel tank is 60 litres
- Claimed max towing weight 1500kg
- Warranty: Seven years/150,000km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition, tyre pressure monitoring, 10.25 inch infotainment, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, sun roof, fake leather, power front seats, three zone air, 18-inch alloys, temporary spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 67%; 5yr: 53%

compare with ...

Ford Everest, Toyota Kluger, Hyundai Santa Fe, Kia Sorento, LDV D90

MAHINDRA **SCORPIO** FROM **$41,990**

Indian automotive giant Mahindra has now moved into the mainstream market with two family-sized wagons, the 2.0-litre turbopetrol/front-wheel drive XUV700 seven-seater SUV, and the 2.2-litre turbodiesel Scorpio six-seater 4x4.

Pricetags that are $10,000 or more below the established players are designed to get Mahindra on to buyers' shopping radar.

The Scorpio Z8 costs $41,990 drive away. In terms of size, seats and genuine 4x4 capability, its main rivals are Toyota's Fortuner (from $53,775) the Ford Everest (from $59,240), Mitsubishi's Pajero Sport (from $51,540) and Isuzu's MU-X (from $54,400).

Scorpio Z8L, tested here, is $46,990 drive away.

Up front is Mahindra's 129kW/400Nm 2.2-litre four cylinder turbodiesel. A six-speed automatic is standard, plus a dual range transfer case (with electronic selection of 4H and 4L) and an automatic locking rear differential. On the bitumen, drive goes to the rear wheels.

Off-road tech includes three selectable traction control modes for different surfaces and hill descent control.

Scorpio is body on chassis construction and runs a live rear axle, with coils all round.

The 2.2 is slightly down on power and torque compared to more expensive rivals, but it's a fine engine, with easy, responsive pulling power at low revs, exceptional smoothness, and, in most situations, single figure fuel economy. It's a Euro6 engine, so the Ad Blue tank needs to be replenished at each service.

The rest of the drivetrain is well sorted, too, with the Aisin six-speed providing smooth, timely shifts and, in low range, the ability to easily climb and descend pretty extreme terrain. Relatively low clearance and limited wheel articulation are Scorpio's main off road limitations.

Claimed maximum towing capacity is 2500kg, but 1500-2000kg would be a more realistic limit for this engine.

Handling is fine as long as you're sensible. Quite stiffly-sprung suspension minimises body roll in corners, at the price of a firm ride, especially in town. Compliance improves with speed.

The driver gets a comfortable, though rather unsupportive, seat and faces a set of analogue instruments; in the centre is an eight-inch infotainment touchscreen that's reasonably intuitive. Fake leather, a chilled glovebox and three zone air are standard. The Z8L adds Sony audio and wireless phone charging.

Two individual second row seats are spacious and comfortable, with the convenience of a walk through to the row three bench, which is suitable only for pre-teenage kids.

There are a few glaring omissions and annoyances in the Scorpio, the main one being a complete lack of even basic driver assist safety features such as autonomous emergency braking. Mahindra claims a five star safety rating from "Global NCAP" but this is misleading. Global NCAP is a completely different organisation that does not test to the same rigorous, comprehensive standards as ANCAP or EuroNCAP, so we won't recognise it in this magazine.

On the ANCAP website, the Scorpio scores zero stars overall, 44 percent for adult occupant protection, 23 percent for vulnerable road user protection and zero percent for safety assist technology.

Other issues include a lack of boot space, a clumsy side hinged rear door, a non-reach adjustable steering wheel and minimal oddment storage near the driver.

On and off road, there's not much wrong with the way the Scorpio drives — especially at the price — but it's so far off the pace as far as safety goes that it's impossible to recommend as a family wagon. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Zero stars
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯨☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ The right price for a big 4x4 wagon
- ✔ Refined, tractable turbodiesel
- ✔ Genuine off road ability
- ✔ Tidy enough handling on road
- ✔ Full size spare

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Zero stars ANCAP score
- ✘ No steering wheel adjustment
- ✘ Limited boot space
- ✘ Side-hinged tailgate
- ✘ Expensive servicing and soft resale values

SPEX

- Made in India
- 2.2-litre, four cylinder turbodiesel/six-speed automatic/dual range 4x4
- 129kW of power at 3500rpm/400Nm of torque from 1750-2750rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.8L/100km highway; 7.8L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 190gkm; fuel tank is 57 litres
- Maximum towing weight: 2500kg
- Warranty: Seven years/150,000km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, tri-zone air, USB A and C ports, chilled glovebox, 18-inch alloy wheels, full size spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 52%

compare with ...

Ford Everest, Isuzu MU-X, Mitsubishi Pajero Sport, Toyota Prado/Fortuner

MASERATI **GRECALE** FROM **$122,500**

The Grecale is Maserati's most affordable model and a car more about everyday sensibilities than outright pace.

That said, the mid-sized SUV still lives up to the Italian brand's promise of being a little more exciting than most luxury machines — and a lot more indulgent.

Prices start at $122,500 for the GT model, which drives all four wheels by a 221kW/450Nm 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo. It gets sumptuous leather, front and rear parking sensors, powered front seats, powered tailgate, surround view cameras and 19-inch alloys. There's also a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster and 12.3-inch central infotainment screen.

Various option packs allow owners to add all manner of features, from heated and ventilated seats to a head-up display, wireless phone charger and a rear touchscreen.

There's a dizzying array of personalisation options, from the colour of the brake calipers and interior trims and stitching to seat colours and wheels.

Safety is taken care of with six airbags, auto braking, rear cross traffic alert, blind spot warning and driver monitoring.

Stepping up to the Modena ($148,000) adds 20-inch wheels and a feistier 243kW engine, although it makes the same 450Nm. There's also a rear infotainment screen, ambient lighting and various trim updates.

At the top of the Grecale line-up is the Trofeo, which gets a 3.0-litre V6 twin turbo making a more meaningful 390kW and 620Nm. The engine is a detuned version of the fantastic Nettuno engine also used in the MC20 supercar. It not only makes for snappy acceleration — it's claimed to top 100km/h in 3.8 seconds — with excellent thrust across a broad rev range, but it also brings an aural accompaniment that is nicely aligned with the Italian heritage. Large paddle shifters are a nice addition for those who want to take control of gear shifts, although the eight-speed auto is slick and decisive in its selections.

That V6 isn't particularly frugal, though.

While it's a car that will no doubt be used for family duties we were also lucky enough to unleash it on a race track, where the dynamic talent becomes immediately obvious.

The Grecale may have the requisite higher ride height of an SUV, but it also remains beautifully poised in corners. There's loads of grip and plenty of accompanying talent if you step up the pace. There are whiffs of playfulness, too, ensuring the Trofeo with its extra pace delivers on smiles.

Powerful brakes slow things swiftly, too, adding the final piece to what is an accomplished driving machine.

Sculpted front seats hug in all the right places and controls fall easily to hand. The large central infotainment set-up doesn't set any benchmarks but is easy enough to navigate, with sensible menus and a crisp display.

The Grecale also looks after those in the rear, with decent legroom; three across the rear would be cosy, though, and the raised centre position suggests it's not a seat that will be used regularly. The boot is useful with 535L of space, or slightly more in the Trofeo.

But it's the attention to detail, Italian flair and slick driving manners that ensure the Grecale is not just another mid-sized SUV. The liberally applied trident badges don't hurt, either, in a market segment where German marques dominate.

Start saving, though, because such individuality doesn't come cheap. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Attention to detail and personalization options
- ✔ Sharp dynamics
- ✔ Brisk V6 engine

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ All those options can quickly ramp up the price
- ✘ Four-cylinder engine doesn't have the firepower some may expect in a Maserati
- ✘ Entry-level models miss out on equipment fanfare

SPEX (Trofeo)

- Made in Italy
- 3.0-litre V6 twin turbo petrol, eight-speed auto, all-wheel drive
- 390kW of power/620Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 3.8 seconds (claimed)
- 11.2L/100km average fuel use, premium unleaded, CO2 emissions are 254g/km
- Warranty: 3 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, 360-degree cameras, navigation, digital radio, leather, power tailgate, 21-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 69%; 5yr: 48%

compare with ...

Porsche Macan, BMW X3, Mercedes-Benz GLC, Audi Q5, Lexus NX, Genesis GV70, Volvo XC60

MAZDA **BT-50** FROM **$56,220**

Mazda's BT-50 was given a major facelift in early 2025, bringing styling and equipment upgrades while dumping manual transmissions.

Reducing the number of variant from 21 to 15, the update also saw the flagship Thunder left out of the line-up, but Mazda says it will be back in the range in the near future.

The latest BT-50 is no longer a reskinned Ford Ranger. Instead, Mazda has turned to Isuzu and its latest D-Max. This brings major benefits in reliability, safety and fuel efficiency, but de-Rangering the BT has its downsides, too.

Under the bonnet, the new BT offers lazier performance from the 140kW/450Nm 3.0-litre Isuzu turbodiesel compared with the previous BT/Ranger's 147kW/470Nm 3.2 litre five cylinder engine.

The 1.9-litre is no longer offered in BT-50 dual-cab 4x4.

Prices for the 3.0-litre dual cab 4x4 ute with a six-speed auto start with the XT at $56,220, XTR $62,750, GT $66,170 and SP $71,500 — increases of between $990-$3510.

Driving position adjustability and seat comfort are excellent by ute standards with plenty of storage.

Back seat passengers don't have it quite as good. Legroom is OK, but the seat is low so adults sit knees up. Vents are provided.

As with many utes, the ride is absorbent on big bumps but firm springs also transmit smaller imperfections so you're constantly jostled in the cabin.

Safety is up with the class leading Ranger/Amarok. If carrying kids and safety are high priorities, they are a natural choice.

Mazda's autonomous emergency braking and lane departure warning/lane keeping systems are aggressive, though, and sometimes intervene unnecessarily. This can drive you nuts. You can turn both off (not advisable for AEB) but they default to on every time you restart.

On the move, the Mazda feels old school. There's enough grunt there to do the job, but $60K-$70K can buy a lot more — a 185kW/600Nm Ranger/Amarok 3.0 V6 or a 150kW/500Nm Hilux 2.8. Acceleration is leisurely.

That said, the Isuzu engine is smoother than the Toyota's, acceptably quiet, and delivers great fuel economy. Isuzu's drivetrain reliability is also a significant improvement on Ford's.

Handling is typical one tonner: unremarkable and predictably ponderous. Off road, tackling tricky terrain in low range, the drive by wire accelerator is a touch too sensitive, the transition from off to on boost can be abrupt and shift paddles would be useful.

Otherwise, no problems, with a locking rear diff, appropriate low range gearing, 240mm of clearance, a claimed 800mm fording depth and hill descent control all standard.

As with most utes, the BT's claimed maximum towing capacity of 3500kg is a meaningless number.

At gross vehicle mass (GVM) of 3100kg, your trailer can weigh no more than 2850kg in order to keep within the legal gross combination mass (GCM) of 5950kg. An auto transmission cooler is fitted.

BT50 is no longer a bargain-priced Ranger, so it has, as a deal and a drive, slipped back a little in the pack. It's moved to the front, though, for reliability, fuel efficiency and safety, and should be on your test drive list.

In the overall scheme of things, the 3.0-litre V6 Ranger and new Amarok are a long way in front of the four cylinder pack when it comes to performance and, especially, towing.

In the four cylinder field, 150kW/500Nm is the going rate for power and torque, so the BT-50 is slightly off the money. If you can't stretch to $65K-plus for V6 power, drive the BT50 back to back with HiLux and its D-Max twin. ■

STARS ★★★⯨☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯨☆
Value for money
★★★⯨☆
Overall
★★★⯨☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ A grade safety
- ✔ Comfortable driving position and luxurious front seats
- ✔ Stylish, high quality, loaded interior
- ✔ Isuzu drivetrain reliability and economy

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Why should you pay thousands more if you don't have an ABN?
- ✘ Knees up back seat
- ✘ Towing numbers don't add up
- ✘ Overly aggressive AEB and lane keeping
- ✘ You can buy more grunt for less money

SPEX (GT)

- Made in Thailand
- 3.0-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/ six-speed auto/dual range 4x4
- 140kW of power at 3600rpm/450Nm of torque from 1600-2600rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.9L/100km hwy; 9.8L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 207gkm; fuel tank is 76L
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, lane keep assist, heated, leather-faced front seats, walk away central locking, remote engine start, dual zone air, navigation, digital radio, voice control (though not for address entry in navigation), two USB connectors (one in the back seat), self levelling LED headlights and 18-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 70%; 5yr: 61%

compare with ...

Ford Ranger, Isuzu D-Max, Mitsubishi Triton, Nissan Navara, Toyota HiLux, VW Amarok

MAZDA **CX-3** FROM **$27,070**

The CX-3 is Mazda's ageing offering in the hotly contested compact SUV segment. The range was rationalised in mid-2023 with the deletion of manual transmission and all-wheel drivetrain variants. Prices also rose by about $3000 and have marginally for 2025.

Powered by a 110kW/195Nm 2.0-litre naturally aspirated petrol engine, matched with a six-speed automatic and front wheel-drive, the CX-3 is up against more than 20 contenders including Hyundai's Venue, Toyota's CH-R and the Kia Stonic.

There are five petrol powered spec levels — base G20 Sport ($27,070), Pure ($30,370), Evolve ($32,100), GT SP ($35,330) and Akari, at $38,890.

Mazda added extra safety features as part of the previous overhaul. Blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert are now standard across the range. Wireless Apple CarPlay, wired Android Auto and remote operated side windows are also included on all grades.

Pure adds LED lights with automatic high beam, lane departure warning and a head-up display. Evolve includes 18-inch alloys, front parking sensors and a white fake leather/tan suede upholstery combination of questionable taste.

Touring SP gets real black leather/suede and adaptive cruise; Akari includes Bose audio and a sunroof.

CX-3's interior space is generous by class standards, with more than adequate rear leg and head room for two full-size adults.

Three back there is tight in the extreme, but the CX-3 is unashamedly pitched at young singles and pre-child couples, so that rear-room-for-three issue — and a relatively modest cargo volume of 264 litres with rear seats up, growing to 1174 litres with the (60/40 split-fold) second row folded — is bang on brief.

Mazda says special attention has been paid to the interior design, right down to the choice of materials and finishes, to deliver a clean, premium feel. There's no doubt that objective has been achieved.

There is better-than-average storage space around the cabin, including clever oddment trays in the front console, big bottle bins in the doors (front and rear) plus large seat pockets.

The seating position has been designed to hit the sweet spot between the commanding vision of a traditional, high-riding SUV and the impressive handling dynamics of a hatch with a lower centre of gravity.

Mazda's naturally aspirated, high-compression Skyactiv petrol engines are certainly fuel efficient but performance is not a strong point and more grunt would definitely be welcome, but the payoff is excellent fuel efficiency — on regular unleaded, too.

The now-deleted AWD models were the pick of the CX3 range as far as handing is concerned, but the front wheel drive variants now offered are tidy enough, with no seriously bad vices.

That said, Subaru's all-wheel drive Crosstrek has the best ride/handling compromise in this class, while Toyota's C-HR Hybrid is the pick of them when it comes to drive train performance and efficiency. Hyundai's Venue is great value, and as an overall package, the Skoda Kamiq is hard to beat.

Also noteworthy is Mazda's insistence on 10,000km service intervals, which is at the shorter end of the market average.

The CX-3 was one of the front runners in compact SUVs a few years ago but time is unkind to middle-aged cars. Test drive it with these rivals before you make a decision. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★⯪☆☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality, reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Outstanding quality
- ✔ Comfortable, stylish interior
- ✔ Outstanding fuel efficiency
- ✔ Reasonable value for money

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ 2.0-litre petrol is a bit gutless
- ✘ 18-inch alloys on top-spec models compromise ride comfort
- ✘ No rear camera in base Neo
- ✘ No rear-seat air vents

SPEX (Sport)

- Made in Japan
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder petrol/six-speed automatic/front-wheel drive
- 110kW of power at 6000rpm and 195Nm of torque at 2800rpm
- 0–100km/h N/A
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Max towing weight: 1200kg
- 5.5L/100km highway; 7.7L/100km city; 91 octane. CO$_2$ emissions are 146g/km; fuel tank is 48 litres
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, low speed AEB, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, camera, Bluetooth, wireless Apple CarPlay, wired Android Auto , rear parking sensors, 16-inch alloy wheels
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 73%; 5yr: 64%

compare with ...

Kia Stonic, Hyundai Venue, Toyota Yaris Cross, Nissan Juke, Suzuki Vitara

MAZDA **CX-30** FROM **$34,060**

Mazda's CX-30 shares architecture, front wheel drivetrains and dash layouts with the 3 sedan and hatch, so you could accurately describe it as a Mazda3 wagon.

Prices start at $34,060 for the G20 Pure, with a 114kW 2.0-litre naturally-aspirated petrol four/ six-speed automatic. Evolve is priced at $35,960, Touring LE at $42,060 and Astina, tested here, at $44,840.

G25 variants, with a 139kW 2.5-litre engine, start at $40,140 for the Touring; the Astina is $46,460.

All-wheel drive adds $2000 to the Astina variant.

GT SP specification, also available with front or all-wheel drive, costs $43,260 and $45,260 respectively.

CX-30, like several rivals, well illustrates that fact that a compact SUV is often less car for more money than the hatchback on which it's based.

This includes interior space. Surely an SUV is bigger that a hatch? Not this one.

CX-30's wheelbase is 70mm shorter than the 3 hatch (and sedan.) So rear seat legroom is similarly tight for adults, though access is easier due to the higher roof. CX-30's small boot has just 22 litres more capacity than the 3 hatch and 127 litres less than the sedan.

On the road, its 2.0-litre engine has to shift 50kg more metal, so its already lethargic performance is further dulled, and, again due to the SUV's extra mass, fuel consumption rises by .03 litres/100km.

CX-30's elevated SUV stance and extra weight also has an intrinsically adverse effect in corners. Mazda has tried to counteract this by fitting very firm suspension, to better control the car's mass and minimise body roll in tight bends.

It works. The CX-30 is one of the better handling compact SUVs, but the ride is hard and often jarring, especially at the front end. Lifeless steering exhibits some rack shake in bumpy bends, also exacerbated by the front suspension's lack of compliance.

What Mazda has done here — and it's far from alone — is take one of the best cars in its class, dumb it down as an SUV, and whack a higher price on it: an extra $4970 for CX-30 2.0-litre G20 Touring specification, for example, compared with the same grade 3 Touring hatch and sedan.

As mentioned earlier, the 2.0-litre, though adequate around town, refined and exceptionally fuel efficient, is slow and unresponsive, especially in the lower half of the rev range, against comparably-priced turbo-powered rivals such as the 1.6-litre Kia Seltos or 1.4-litre VW Tiguan and T-Roc. It's also a plodder compared with the Toyota Corolla Cross hybrid.

As with other Mazdas, the CX-30 does excel at quality, design and safety. It uses the 3's beautifully simple, elegant dash, which wouldn't look out of place in an Audi, plus the same user-friendly, cursor-based, fully-featured infotainment system.

Astina gets a heated, leather wrapped driver's seat that's comfortable and supportive. You sit low in CX-30, as though you're in a sports car rather than an SUV.

Safety tech includes 360 degree camera coverage and an array of other aids you can adjust according to your preferences.

The G20 CX-30, though, is too much money for not enough SUV. Kia's Seltos, the Hyundai Kona, Skoda's Kamiq, VW's T-Roc and Toyota's Corolla Cross are better buying. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★☆☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality, reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯨☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Looks sharper than the average SUV
- ✔ Beautifully designed interior too
- ✔ Good fuel economy on regular unleaded
- ✔ Well equipped with safety features
- ✔ Comprehensive, user friendly infotainment

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Overpriced
- ✘ 2.0-litre is slow and unresponsive
- ✘ Hard ride
- ✘ Dead steering
- ✘ Tight rear seat and boot space

SPEX (G20 Astina)

- Made in Japan
- 2.0-litre four cylinder petrol/six-speed automatic/front-wheel drive
- 114kW of power at 6000rpm/200Nm of torque at 4000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 10.2 seconds (claimed)
- 5.6L/100km highway; 8.0L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO2 emissions are 152g/km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, low speed autonomous emergency braking, 360 degree cameras, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, head-up display, speed sign recognition, rear cross traffic alert, navigation, voice control, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, digital radio, partial leather upholstery, heated front seats, 18-inch alloy wheels
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 63%; 5yr: 55%

compare with ...

Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Toyota Corolla Cross, Chery Omoda 5, VW T-Cross

MAZDA **CX-5** FROM **$36,740**

Evolution is the name of the game for one of Australia's most popular SUVs, but it's starting to show its age.

Starting from $36,740, the front-wheel drive Mazda CX-5 Maxx vies with Nissan's X-Trail, Subaru's Forester and Toyota's RAV4 for safety honours, but as the new favourite family freighter class, these mid-size SUVs are now top sellers.

For 2025 Mazda has reduced the range with the diesel engine, previously offered in Touring and Akera grades, now dropped.

Maxx Sport is $40,460 with front-wheel drive or $42,960 with all-wheel drive. Touring specification, from $45,100, offers an all-wheel drivetrain, as does GT SP, from $52,960, which puts you into luxury equipment territory with a powered tailgate, sunroof, 19-inch alloys, adaptive front headlights (that "see" through corners), heated and powered front seats with driver's-side memory, leather and a Bose audio upgrade.

The flagship Akera, from $52,650, adds LED cabin lighting, cooled front seats and a 360-degree camera.

A 2023 update included a 10.25-inch infotainment screen across the range and wireless Apple CarPlay/wired Android Auto in Maxx Sport grade and above.

Maxx is front-wheel drive, powered by a 115kW/200Nm 2.0-litre four-cylinder petrol engine, with either six-speed manual (Maxx only) or six-speed auto transmissions.

The 2.0-litre engine is a bit gutless. It's not especially quick off the line, works pretty hard and makes a bit of noise as a result of frequently having to rely on lots of revs to get a result.

It's worth the extra $2500 in Maxx Sport for the all-wheel drive, 140kW/252Nm 2.5-litre petrol drivetrain.

GT and Akera all-wheel drives are also available with a 170kW/420Nm 2.5-litre turbopetrol engine, priced at $52,960 and $55,150.

Slick and refined, yet with a sporty edge that suits the Mazda's character, the naturally-aspirated 2.5 petrol engine brings brisk acceleration across a broad rev range, especially at higher speeds, and returns impressive fuel economy figures to boot.

Mazda says the key priorities during development of this second-generation CX-5, launched in 2017, were to improve comfort and refinement, and since then many subtle tweaks have continued that process.

Engine and road noise have been quelled, addressing one of the preceding model's biggest issues.

More sound-deadening material, superior door seals, extra carpeting and better aerodynamics have transformed the Mazda to near-premium levels.

The rear backrests now recline in two positions while from Maxx Sport up, rear air vents and a rear USB port make the back seat a happier, more comfortable place for kids.

Throw in deeper windows, thinner pillars and a lower-set dash, and the overall ambience inside is now one of more lightness and space, even though dimensionally hardly anything's changed.

CX-5 is smaller than X-Trail, Forester and RAV4, more comparable in size to Hyundai's Tucson, Kia's Sportage Skoda Karoq and the VW Tiguan.

X-Trail, Forester, RAV4 hybrid, Sportage and Tiguan are the overall class leaders.

Some CX-5 owners claimed to have had major and potentially hazardous problems with the drivetrain, causing Mazda to recall more than 35,000 vehicles, across several model lines, in 2019.

Mazda ended up in the Federal Court, defending itself against charges laid by the ACCC, and was found to made false or misleading representations to nine customers and failing to comply with its Australian Consumer Law obligations by refusing these customers a full refund.

Note too that the CX-5, like the CX-3, no longer has a five star ANCAP rating as it has not yet been retested to new 2024 protocols. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★☆☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Quieter, more comfortable interior
- ✔ Strong performance from 2.5 petrol engine and the 2.5 turbo
- ✔ Composed handling
- ✔ High safety equipment
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ 2.0-litre base engine lacks torque, makes a lot of noise and auto can be reluctant to kick down
- ✘ Reliability issues
- ✘ Slow steering
- ✘ No auxiliary digital speedo on lower-spec models

SPEX (Maxx Sport 2.5 AWD)

- Made in Japan
- 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol/six-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 140kW of power at 6000rpm/252Nm of torque at 4000rpm
- 0–100km in 7.8 seconds (US model)
- 6.4L/100km highway, 9.5L/100km city; 91 octane; CO_2 emissions are 175g/km (approx)
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, traction control, Autonomous Emergency Braking front and rear, rear cross-traffic alert, blind-spot monitoring, LED headlights, camera, digital radio, rear parking sensors, keyless start, navigation, dual-zone air, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, Bluetooth, auto on/off lights, rain-sensing wipers, leather-wrapped steering wheel, 17-inch alloy wheels, and a temporary spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 66%; 5yr: 56%

compare with ...

Toyota RAV4, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Nissan X-Trail, Subaru Forester, Mitsubishi Outlander, BYD Sealion 6

MAZDA **CX-60** FROM **$55,240**

The CX-60 is a mid-sized SUV that kicks off at $55,240 plus on-road costs for the Evolve G40E, with a new 209kW/450Nm 3.3-litre inline six-cylinder turbopetrol engine. Grab the 187kW/550Nm D50E turbodiesel (of the same straight six configuration) and it's another $2000. Or there's a plug-in hybrid EV (P50E) from $68,290.

For that you get fake leather, dual-zone ventilation, digital instruments, 360-degree camera, blind spot monitoring, wireless phone charging and wireless Apple CarPlay/Android Auto on a 10.25-inch screen.

It's an $8000 jump to the GT, which adds 20-inch wheels, powered front seats, heated steering wheel, heated seats and a Bose sound system.

Or you can go all out with the Azami (starting at $68,440) with Nappa leather, ambient lighting, ventilated front seats and memory controls for the driver's position.

For a car around the size of the Mazda CX-5 it's a hefty price tag and positions the newcomer closer to BMW and Mercedes-Benz territory.

A big part of the sales pitch is the Mazda's drivetrain layout, whereby the engine runs north-south and sends more drive to the back wheels.

It's all about driving nous, something the CX-60 does well — in parts.

It's a nicely poised SUV that scampers through corners convincingly, at least when the road is smooth.

Throw in some bumps and the rear-end can buck. Riding on 20-inch wheels the suspension also lumbers into bumps with a clumsiness not typically associated with Mazda. Weighty steering adds to occasional ponderous progress.

At least the turning circle is usefully tight, making city manoeuvring easier.

The CX-60 jars less on the 18-inch rubber of the Evolve, although there's no hiding the so-so fundamentals.

There's similar hit-and-miss under the bonnet.

While the slinky inline six-cylinder engines deliver on grunt, they lack the efficiency of a true hybrid. That's because they're mild hybrid systems. That siad, the diesel is impressively frugal.

It's the PHEV that plays more convincingly into that fuel-miser role. Teaming a 2.5-litre four-cylinder engine with a genuine hybrid system makes it the most powerful of the trio.

Stamp on the throttle and there's no shortage of oomph, albeit with some inconsistencies in the transition from electric to petrol power. That said, we haven't sampled the mid-2025 update aimed at addressing its issues

It can also run solely on electricity for shorter journeys, something that helps Mazda claim a fairyland average fuel consumption figure of 2.1 litres per 100km.

It doesn't take long with the CX-60 P50E to realise there are compromises. In electric mode it's not very punchy, so if you want to motor around clean and green you'll be doing it at a leisurely pace. It's also not very efficient. The 17.8kWh battery is claimed to travel up to 76km, although something closer to 60km is more realistic. That means it's using almost 30kWh of electricity for every 100km,.

In hybrid mode it can also slurp north of 10L/100km, on premium.

Keep in mind, too, that the PHEV needs to be serviced the same as any petrol Mazda, even if you drive it mostly as an EV. That means a check-up every 12 months or 15,000km.

All this adds up to a car that's awkwardly positioned among an EV and efficiency battle where it struggles to find clear air. While the identity crisis surroudning its pricing was partially addressed as part of the 2025 update, the CX-60 still doesn't quite tackle the brand's value-focused heartland. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Quality, reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Stylish body
- ✔ Upmarket cabin with quality finishes and materials
- ✔ Tight turning circle
- ✔ Punchy performance
- ✔ High quality throughout

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Price tag above what many expect from Mazda
- ✘ Firm ride, especially on 20-inch wheels
- ✘ Petrol mild hybrid not very frugal
- ✘ PHEV not as efficient as some may expect
- ✘ Touchscreen not always a touchscreen once the car is moving

SPEX (Evolve P50e hybrid)

- Made in Japan
- 2.5-litre, four-cylinder petrol/electric plug-in hybrid/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 141kW of power/500Nm of torque (system output)
- 0-100km/h in 5.8 seconds (claimed)
- Combined: 2.1L/100km; 95 premium; fuel tank is 50 litres
- Max towing weight: 2500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, plastic upholstery, dual zone air, wireless phone charging, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, 10.25-inch touchscreen, navigation, digital instruments, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 59%; 5yr: 41%

compare with ...

BMW X3, Audi Q5, Lexus NX, Mercedes-Benz GLC, Genesis GV70

MAZDA **CX-80** FROM **$55,200**

Mazda is making a bold pitch for the premium large SUV family with its new line-up that now includes the CX-80.

And it's the car that arguably most closely reinforces more traditional Mazda traits, with value at its heart.

Sharing much of its layout with the CX-60, the CX-80 gets an extra 250mm between the front and rear wheels, in turn increasing interior space. That also allows for a third row of seats, taking capacity to seven (the CX-60 is a five-seater).

That said, the CX-80 is hardly a bargain, with pricing starting at $55,200 for the petrol-only Pure.

That model gets 18-inch wheels, smart key entry, head-up display, dual-zone ventilation, adaptive cruise control and a modest 10.25-inch infotainment screen with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

Despite the shift to digital instrument clusters the Pure sticks with mostly analogue dials, which doesn't match the price tag.

It's powered by a 3.3-litre inline six-cylinder turbo petrol engine making a lusty 209kW and 450Nm. A 48V mild hybrid system helps keep fuel bills down, but only slightly; this is not a full blown hybrid, something shown in the fuel numbers. Claimed average consumption is 8.4 litres per 100km.

Step up to the Touring ($62,200) and you get a full digital instrument cluster, heated front seats, leather, power adjustable front seats with memory for the driver, powered tailgate and a wireless phone charger.

You could argue as least some of that should be fitted to the Pure, given the premium positioning of the model.

And if you want a different engine Mazda offers the Touring as a D50e diesel ($64,200) or P50e plug-in hybrid (PHEV, at a hefty $75,250). The diesel makes 187kW/550Nm and the PHEV 241kW/500Nm.

From there you can keep spending with the GT (from $69,200), which gets 20-inch wheels, adaptive headlights, heated second row seats, panoramic sunroof and a 12-speaker Bose sound system.

The Azami (from $74,400) adds Nappa leather and ventilation for the front seats, as well as design tweaks. And you can add an SP pack to it ($5000) that adds tan trim, a suede dash, various trim upgrades and two individual captain's chairs in the second row instead of the three-person bench.

Like the CX-60 the interior is generally upmarket with quality finishes. The further you step up through the range, though, the closer you venture to luxury brands, making it tricky to swallow.

On the road, the CX-80 is surefooted and competent. There's a rear bias to its driving manners — more drive is sent to the back wheels — due to the layout, making for an athletic demeanour.

But weighty steering and a firmness to the ride take away from its everyday comfort.

The petrol engine is raspy, although never overly brisk. The diesel has more low-rev meat for easy acceleration.

The PHEV beats both on performance, although there are caveats.

Don't expect to get anywhere near the claimed average 2.7 litres per 100km fuel use. It was done to a laboratory standard; expect to use none when in EV mode or many multiples of that running in hybrid mode.

The big appeal with the PHEV is its ability to run on electricity for everyday duties up to 65km. A 17.8kWh battery powers and electric motor for lower powered applications, with the 2.5-litre petrol engine kicking in if you ask for more grunt.

It's not always smooth or seamless in the transition from petrol to electricity – and the interplay with the eight-speed auto - although it's a lot better than what debuted in the CX-60.

Charging can only be done at AC wallboxes — not DC fast charges — as up to 7.2kW. A 20-80 per cent charge takes 90 minutes, or you can plug into a standard powerpoint for a circa-nine-hour charge.

But that P50e PHEV is an expensive beast, with prices starting at $75,250. At that price it's difficult to justify.

The sweet spot of the CX-80 range is closer to its entry point, in either petrol or diesel guise. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Classy cabin
- ✔ Hearty six-cylinder engines
- ✔ Plug-in hybrid offers 65km of EV only running
- ✔ Decent performance and roadholding

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Skinny equipment list for entry Pure
- ✘ Premium pricing doesn't quite translate
- ✘ Heavy feeling on the road
- ✘ Hefty price premium for plug-in hybrid

SPEX (P50e Azami)

- Made in Japan
- 2.5-litre four-cylinder with electric motor/17.8kWh battery/
- 241kW of power/500Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 6.8 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max EV range: 65km
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, Nappa leather, powered front seats, heated and ventilated front seats, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 56%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Toyota Kluger, Hyundai Palisade, Mazda CX-70, Mazda CX-90, Kia Sorento

MAZDA **CX-90** FROM **$68,800**

The CX-90 is the Mazda with a BMW price tag, although a 2025 rejig of the range made it more accessible.

The largest car in the Japanese brand's stables is also the most expensive, priced from $68,800 for the petrol-powered Touring or another $2000 for the diesel.

At least there are seven seats and a whole lot of space, the two highlights for a car that effectively steps in for the CX-9.

Each gets 19-inch wheels, leather, smart key entry, head-up display, heated front seats, tri-zone ventilation, wireless phone charger, 360-degree camera and a suite of active safety systems, including auto braking and blind spot warning.

But only a 10.25-inch infotainment screen and a mostly analogue instrument cluster.

It's not until you get into the GT ($84,445 or $85,550 for the diesel; the premium for the diesel reduces with more expensive variants because it attracts less luxury car tax because it's classified as a fuel efficient vehicle) that you get a full digital display, 21-inch alloy wheels, heated middle row seats, heated steering wheel, panoramic sunroof and a 12-speaker Bose audio system.

The Azami (at $86,070 for the petrol or $86,000 for the diesel) picks up ambient lighting, Nappa leather, ventilated front seats and a see-through camera view.

A Takumi pack or SP pack adds around $5000 to each and includes various colour and trim upgrades to give it more of the premium look and feel — as well as a six-figure price tag.

The CX-90 delivers on space, especially in its back half.

The middle row seats have loads of knee room and you can slide the seatbase to trade off between second- and third-row space.

There's a so-so 257 litres behind the third-row or a far more useful 608L if you fold the third row down.

The CX-90 is also nicely presented with quality plastics and enough silver highlights and leather touches to raise the ambience. It's a classy space and one that shuffles it above many mainstream rivals.

It is worthy of luxury pricing? We're not convinced…

Its size also brings with it heft, with around 2.2 tonnes to shift.

That's something that has a big bearing on the CX-90's road manners.

The steering is heavy-ish at low speeds, something that translates to nice weight at speed. It's the first indication it's a car tailored to families who enjoy the drive as much as the destination.

There's some clumsiness on 21-inch tyres and inherent firmness generally, all of which helps the control but takes the edge off everyday comfort.

The grunty engines also have to work harder to live up to the sportiness elsewhere. Each displaces 3.3 litres in an inline six-cylinder configuration and has a turbo for added thrust.

There's a 48V mild hybrid system that Mazda likes to market as a hybrid. But fuel savings are mild at best, with the petrol version claimed to average 8.2 litres per 100km and the diesel 5.4L/100km.

Considering the punch on offer — 254kW and 500Nm from the petrol and 187kW/550Nm from the diesel — it's thoroughly respectable, but a full blown hybrid would be more miserly.

The petrol engine likes a rev, something you need to do to unleash its most enticing trait. It's a bit gravelly, but ultimately a willing unit.

The fuel savings and additional low-rev torque of the diesel make it a nicer powerplant in such a heavy car.

Driving aside, it's the value equation that dominates any decision on shelling out for the CX-90.

Leather and luxury accoutrements are nice, but there are chinks in its armour.

Of the newcomers in the Mazda stables it's the one that most struggles to capture the essence of the brand. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Spacious seven-seat body nicely caters to large families
- ✔ Diesel engine works nicely with such a big bus
- ✔ Stable on-road manners
- ✔ Quality finishes and materials

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Luxury pricing is rich for a seven-seat Mazda
- ✘ It's heavy and sometimes feels it
- ✘ Petrol engine not as convincing
- ✘ Firm ride out of sync with luxury positioning

SPEX (Azami D50e)

- Made in Japan
- 3.3-litre inline six-cylinder/eight-speed auto/all-wheel drive
- 187kW of power/550Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 8.4 seconds (claimed)
- 5.3L/100km highway; 5.7L/100km city; CO2 emissions 143g/km; fuel tank 74L
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, Nappa leather, power tailgate, heated and ventilated front seats; heated middle row seats; 21-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Hyundai Palisade, Toyota Kluger, Kia Sorento, Mazda CX-80, Nissan Pathfinder

MERCEDES-BENZ **EQA** FROM **$85,800**

Some car makers want to make a big statement with their new EVs, so they go for styling that's different to your olde worlde internal combustion engine (ICE) car or SUV. The nerdmobile — Nissan's Leaf being a prime example — and the futuristic techno-wow transformer look — think Kia EV6 — are two distinctive EV designs.

But Mercedes' EQA looks like just another version of the GLA compact SUV, because that's what it is. You wouldn't know it's an EV until you push the start button and wonder why it's not making any noise.

Like BMW with its "i" brand, and Volkswagen's "ID", Mercedes has adopted EQ — a wordplay on IQ — to denote its EVs. The last letter references a connection to Mercedes' ICE model lines.

EQA250 costs $85,800, compared with $80,500 for the 2.0-litre turbo petrol GLA250. The difference buys a lot of petrol, but the EQA is also a more luxurious, comfortable SUV, with that cone of silence refinement only an EV can deliver, and adaptive suspension tuned for a smooth, supple ride.

It's not a sports car. Drive from its 140kW/375Nm single electric motor goes to the front wheels and it weighs two tonnes. The 0-100km/h sprint takes a leisurely 8.9 seconds.

Standard equipment is comparable, with Mercedes all-digital dash and MBUX voice control smarts both included, along with worksburger driver assist safety. The back seat is an uncomfortable knees up affair for adults, because the floor is elevated to accommodate the battery underneath.

The EQA350 variant is $102,579. It uses the same 70.5kWh battery as the EQA250, but has two electric motors, producing 215kW/520Nm, and all-wheel drive. It reaches 100km/h in just six seconds.

There's nothing difficult about driving the EQA. In fact it's easier than a petrol car. And in many ways better, especially in town.

It's much more responsive at low revs, for example, because the electric motor delivers maximum torque the moment it starts to spin. It's almost silent, and completely vibration-free. You don't have to worry about being in the wrong gear, either, or wait for a gearchange when you're in a hurry, because there is one gear only. Squeeze the accelerator. Go. Release it. Stop. It's as easy as that.

In normal driving, you don't have to use the brakes. When you lift your right foot, the electric motor becomes a generator, sending power to the battery. This regenerative function can also operate as an adjustable brake, and with practice you can drive using the accelerator alone.

An EV's power consumption is measured in kilowatt hours (kWh), or how many kilowatts of power the vehicle uses to cover 100km. Just like an ICE, this depends upon how much power the motor requires, and how leadfooted you are.

EQA's claimed power consumption is 16.2kWh,and its claimed range from the 70.5kWh battery is 560km. You can go close to that around town, where the battery is being constantly recharged by regenerative braking and you're driving slowly.

But at highway speeds, EVs use much more power and get minimal regenerative braking assistance. Our EQA250 averaged 25.8kWh on the freeway, giving it a considerably less range than an ICE vehicle.

If you're happy with that limitation, you'll find the Mercedes EQA a pleasure to drive and to live with. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance:
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Immediate, silent grunt
- ✔ Beautifully designed interior
- ✔ Tidy handling and a comfortable ride
- ✔ Will go a long way on the battery in the city
- ✔ Up to the minute infotainment tech
- ✔ Loaded with safety tech, too

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Running out of battery power somewhere out of town
- ✘ Uncomfortable back seat
- ✘ $3400 more than the GLA250
- ✘ Resale values aren't great

SPEX (250)

- Made in Germany
- 70.5kWh battery/single electric motor/single speed transmission/front-wheel drive
- 140kW of power/375Nm of torque
- Claimed power consumption: 16.2kWh
- 0-100km/h in 8.9 seconds (claimed)
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, lane keeping, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, semi-automatic parking, speed sign recognition, MBUX infotainment with voice control, navigation, wireless phone charging, digital radio, heated front seats, dual zone air, fake leather upholstery, 19-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 56%; 5yr: 41%

compare with ...

Volvo EX30, Audi Q4 e-tron, BMW iX1, Tesla Model Y, Hyundai Kona Electric, Zeekr X

MERCEDES-BENZ **GLA** FROM **$63,600**

As with most SUVs, Mercedes' GLA is based on a car platform, in this case the A-Class, with which it also shares drivetrains and many other components as well.

The base GLA 200, priced at $63,600, runs a 120kW/270Nm 1.3-litre turbopetrol four, matched with a seven-speed dual clutch transmission front-wheel drive.

Standard equipment includes fake leather upholstery (it's very convincing), a power tailgate, all-digital instruments and infotainment, voice control, navigation, wireless phone charging, digital radio, automatic parking and 19-inch alloys.

The GLA250 4Matic, at $80,500, has a 165kW/350Nm 2.0-litre turbopetrol, an eight-speed DCT and all-wheel drive. It adds lowered suspension, heated front seats and a sunroof.

The AMG-equipped GLA35, tested here, is $99,000, with a 225kW/400Nm 2.0-litre turbopetrol, eight-speed auto and all-wheel drive.

All GLA variants now also use 48 volt mild hybrid assistance for the engine automatic stop/start system and a bit of extra oomph under acceleration.

The GLA35 also includes 20-inch alloys, adaptive sports suspension, leather-wrapped sports seats and an AMG steering wheel.

GLA offers reasonable rear seat legroom, but the boot is quite small and in the GLA35 there's no spare, just a useless "repair kit."

The GLA35 has more than enough engine to do the job, though, with that lovely effortless, elastic delivery that characterises an A-grade turbopetrol four.

It's strong and tractable when driven on a light throttle; pop the question and it responds enthusiastically, pulling hard from 4000rpm to 6500rpm, especially in Sport and Sport + drive modes.

The eight-speed is similar to VW's DSG in that it can delay momentarily in selecting a gear and moving off from rest, exacerbated by the automatic stop/start system. Once on the move, shifts are smooth, fast and timely, however in the Sports modes it's not quite aggressive enough in its rev limits or shift points. This applies when you use the paddles in manual mode as well.

Steering is surprisingly light and very precise. The wheel has more controls than an F1 racer, and you can operate the entire infotainment system using swipe and press buttons.

Adaptive suspension allows you to adjust the ride/handling compromise, but the GLA35 isn't particularly convincing in either respect. The ride on rough suburban streets can be harsh and crashy, even in Comfort mode, while the GLA's elevated SUV stance and extra weight make it feel quite top heavy and a touch unwieldy at speed in tight corners, where it is nowhere near as planted, well-balanced or agile as the lower, lighter A35 hatch. The elevated SUV seating position doesn't feel right in a machine with sporting pretensions, either. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯨☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Beautiful engine with go everywhere
- ✔ Mercedes interiors are a lovely mix of retro and modern
- ✔ Comfortable seats
- ✔ Reasonable fuel economy for a performance SUV
- ✔ Light, precise steering

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Feels top heavy and unbalanced at speed in tight corners
- ✘ Ride can be harsh
- ✘ Eight-speed needs more aggressive programming in Sport modes
- ✘ No spare

SPEX (GLA35 AMG)

- Made in Germany
- 2.0-litre four cylinder turboetrol/ eight-speed DCT/all-wheel drive
- 225kW of power at 5800rpm/400Nm of torque from 3000-4000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 5.2 seconds (claimed)
- 6.8L/100km highway; 10L/100km city; 98 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 179gkm
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, partial AEB, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition, power tailgate, leather upholstery, sports front seats, all-digital instruments and infotainment, voice control, navigation, wireless phone charging, digital radio, automatic parking, adaptive sports suspension and 20-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 63%; 5yr: 54%

compare with ...

BMW X1, Audi Q2, Lexus UX, Volvo XC40, Mini Countryman

MERCEDES-BENZ **GLB** FROM **$72,900**

Mercedes' GLB sits in one of those in-between slots on the SUV size scale. It's a mid-size wagon, but also one of the smaller seven seaters on the market. It goes up against Land Rover's Discovery Sport, VW's Tiguan Allspace and the Skoda Kodiaq.

In all of these vehicles, the extra two seats in the back are generally tight for access and overall space. They're designed for occasional rather than daily use. If you want seven full size seats to transport a tribe on a regular basis, you need a bigger wagon than any of these.

GLB prices kick off at $72,900 for the GLB200, with a 120kW/250Nm 1.3-litre turbopetrol four driving the front wheels via a seven-speed twin clutch automatic. Mild hybrid assistance is standard.

The GLB250 4Matic, tested here, runs a 165kW/350Nm 2.0-litre turbopetrol/eight-speed dual clutch auto and all-wheel drive. It's priced at $84,100.

The Mercedes-AMG GLB35 4 Matic, at $102,100, produces 225kW/400Nm from its 2.0-litre engine.

The EQB EV variants, at $90,000 for the EQB250 140kW single motor front wheel drive and $106,155 for the EQB350 215kW dual motor all-wheel drive, have a claimed range of 371km and 360km respectively from a 66.5kWh battery.

Performance from the GLB250's 2.0-litre turbopetrol engine is reasonable, but at 1.76 tonnes the Mercedes is also pretty heavy, so acceleration is gradual rather than rapid, even in Sport mode. Mercedes claims 0-100km/h in 6.9 seconds. That would be downhill, with a tailwind.

On the highway it can return 6.5-7.0L/100km; around town, you can double that, though 9-10L/100km is achievable, in part thanks to a very efficient, unobtrusive auto stop/start and the transmission's desire to go for the high gears as soon as possible.

Adjustable suspension dampers can be set to Comfort, which gives you a luxurious ride but sloppy body control in corners, or Sport, which firms things up, though the Mercedes always feels heavy and rather ponderous. The VW, Skoda and Land Rover are just as, if not more, capable, taut and secure at speed on a winding road.

Up front, it's an all-digital affair with touchscreen infotainment and configurable instruments. There are no less than four interface options to control things such as audio and navigation, which is needless, distracting complexity. Voice control was hit and miss on the test car. There's plenty of storage and connectivity, including two USB type C connectors for every row of seats and wireless phone charging.

The middle row, split 60/40, has adjustable legroom allowing tall adults to travel comfortably. As mentioned previously, the back seats, which fold up from the floor, are cramped for legroom — even with row two pushed forward — and access/exit is very restricted. Young kids can crawl in and out, but it's almost impossible for an adult.

Boot space is generous in five seater mode and almost non existent with all seats in use.

The GLB250 includes heated front seats (upholstered in fake cow) and a full length sunroof. Less impressive is the absence of surround camera coverage, adaptive cruise and autonomous emergency braking from high speed. At the price, they should be standard, not optional.

Mercedes' GLB250 is competent enough, but that's all. You're paying well over the odds for the Mercedes badge. Skoda's Kodiaq and the VW Tiguan Allspace are arguably better to drive, comparably-equipped and sized SUVs that offer much better value for money. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★ ANCAP
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Space efficient cabin layout
- ✔ Refined, frugal drivetrain
- ✔ Comfortable ride
- ✔ High tech digital dash
- ✔ Connectivity for every seat

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Overpriced compared with rivals
- ✘ Heavy and ponderous in corners
- ✘ Very tight back seat access
- ✘ Underdone for safety tech at the price
- ✘ Voice control works. Only sometimes

SPEX (GLB250)

- Made in Mexico
- 2.0-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/eight-speed dual clutch auto/all-wheel drive
- 165kW of power from 5500-6100rpm/350Nm of torque from 1800-4000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.9 seconds (claimed)
- 6.5L/100km highway; 9.7L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 173gkm; fuel tank is 60L
- Max towing weight: 2000kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, partial AEB, lane keep assist, blind spot monitoring, speed sign recognition, semi-automatic parking, adaptive high beam, heated front seats, sunroof, navigation, MBUX infotainment, digital radio, wireless phone charging, runflat tyres
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 63%; 5yr: 40%

compare with ...

BMW X1, Audi Q3, Volvo XC40, Lexus UX, Land Rover Discovery Sport

MERCEDES-BENZ **GLC** FROM **$89,000**

The simplified GLC range has been steadily growing recently to reflect the popularity of the mid-sized five-door, which is available as a traditional SUV or sleeker-looking coupe.

The entry-level GLC200 wagon is priced from $89,000 and there's no negotiating, because it's sold through agents rather than dealers (even though they look like dealerships) with the price set by head office.

A more powerful GLC300 is from $103,400 or $117,000 as a coupe with more gear.

Sportier AMG models — including a new four-cylinder hybrid for the GLC63 — bring more thrust.

The GLC comes loaded with fruit, including a panoramic sunroof, head-up display and heated front seats.

Safety is taken care of with airbags all around (including a centre front airbag), well-calibrated autonomous braking and blind spot warning with an exit warning function.

There's also an 11.9-inch infotainment screen incorporating wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

Throw in some seriously classy finishes and materials — even the Artico fake leather — and it makes for an upmarket cabin that's brimming with tech. Ambient lighting that swirls around the doors and dash — and even permeates the air vents — is a nice touch at night.

It's a shame the vibrant and crisp central screen doesn't always make the path to major functions as easy as it could be. And, being a Merc, there's still a suite of options that can add thousands to the price.

The five-seat cabin is just as sumptuous in the rear, although the lack of USB charge ports is a rare equipment oversight (there's a pair in the console between the front occupants).

Under the bonnet is a 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol making 150kW in the GLC200 or 190kW in the GLC300, each with a 48V mild hybrid system capable of delivering 17kW and 200Nm.

That 48V system is used to start the engine with a gentle rumble rather than the clatter of a starter motor. It also allows the engine to shut down sooner, in turn saving a few drops of 98 octane premium.

The penalty is some sluggishness at launch, the engine not always waking from its slumber the instant your right foot sends the instructions. There's also occasional clumsiness and hesitation when reapplying the throttle in traffic.

Selectable drive modes include a Sport setting that adds enthusiasm to the throttle and downshifts the nine-speed auto transmission as you slow for corners.

Despite the hybrid marketing, don't expect the mild set-up to be anywhere near as efficient as a true hybrid; it's easy to use more than the 7.7 litres per 100km official claim.

At least it pulls strongly and makes for effortless acceleration, in part due to generous pulling power low in the rev range, but the GLC300 is more comfortable cruiser than sporty corner-carving SUV, even if there's inherent talent in its underpinnings.

While adjustable dampers are common in rivals at this price, GLC has a more traditional passive suspension system that's tuned towards the cushy side.

It's supple and relaxed over bumps, to the point where it occasionally runs out of travel. Also interfering with its otherwise calm ride is the occasional clunk as a result of low profile 20-inch tyres.

Still, while there are chinks in its gleaming armour, the new Mercedes GLC300 ticks plenty of boxes for buyers who wants a traditional luxury SUV that pampers — at a price. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance:
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Sumptuous and classy interior
- ✔ Supple ride
- ✔ Brimming with tech and equipment
- ✔ Refined, punchy turbocharged engine
- ✔ As safe as they come

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's a lot pricier than rivals
- ✘ Laziness when taking off
- ✘ Mild hybrid in GLC300 is a gimmick
- ✘ It's not particularly fuel efficient
- ✘ Bumps can test the suspension's compliance

SPEX (GLC300)

- Made in Germany
- 2.0-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/48 volt mild hybrid/nine-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 190kW of power at 5800rpm/400Nm of torque from 2000-3200rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.2 seconds (claimed)
- 6.3L/100km highway; 10.0L/100km city; 98 premium; CO2 emissions are 175gkm; fuel tank is 95 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: 10 airbags, stability control, autonomous emergency braking (forward and reverse), adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keeping, automatic parking, 11.9-inch touchscreen, wireless phone charging, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, navigation, digital radio, voice control, fake leather upholstery, heated front seats, hands-free power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 70%; 5yr: 46%

compare with ...

BMW X3, Audi Q5, Volvo XC60, Lexus NX, Genesis GV70

MERCEDES-BENZ **GLE** FROM **$136,600**

Mercedes raised GLE prices by up to $25,000 for 2024, but they've come back part-way on some models.

The range opens with the 300d at $136,600. It's powered by a 2.0-litre turbo diesel four-cylinder, with 180kW of power and 500Nm of torque, plus a nine-speed automatic and mild hybrid assistance.

The GLE 450d at $154,900 is powered by a 270kW/700Nm 3.0-litre turbo diesel in-line six-cylinder. The AMG GLE 53 wagon features the 3.0-litre in line twin turbopetrol, tweaked for 320kW/560Nm and fed by an electric compressor. It costs $184,100. Finally, the ballistic AMG GLE63 S, with a 450kW/850Nm twin turbopetrol 4.0-litre V8, is $275,300.

AMG models use a twin clutch nine-speed transmission.

Coupes include the GLE450 ($163,600) with a 280kW/500Nm 3.0-litre straight six turbopetrol, the GLE53 AMG ($195,300) and GLE63 AMG S, at $275,300.

Standard fare includes dual zone air-conditioning with vents to the second-row seats, sensor key with push-button start, two 12.3-inch digital display screens for instruments and infotainment that cover more than half the width of the dash, a power operated tailgate, electrically operated front seats, ambient cabin lighting with 64 colours, and a large high-resolution heads-up display reflected in the windscreen.

Five-seaters have five fast-charging USB-C ports (the standard USB port is redundant in this model), seven-seaters have two more for the third row.

Standard safety includes multi beam LED headlights, autonomous emergency braking, speed sign recognition, a 360-degree camera with a high resolution display, front and rear parking sensors, blind zone warning, rear cross traffic alert and lane-change assist. All tyres except the 22-inch options are runflats, so there's no spare wheel or tyre.

Handy touches include massive pockets for each of the four doors, a generous centre console and twin sun visors to help block side glare in the late afternoon sun.

Air vents and temperature control to the optional third row of seats are not available. Curtain airbag coverage extends all the way to the back row.

We tested the GLE300d. Under the bonnet is a relatively small 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel in a class dominated by 3.0-litre six-cylinders.

However, thanks to a nine-speed auto, it's still relatively brisk (for a family SUV) and yet promises better fuel consumption.

The claimed average consumption is 6.9L/100km, however this number is optimistic.

Driven mainly on freeways and rural roads, you may get close to this number. Driven mainly in the suburbs and stuck in traffic, expect close to double this — on par with other cars of this type and size.

The GLE has a commanding view of the road ahead but the engine is noisier than some rivals, such as the VW Touareg.

That said, it quietens down once you're on the move and using fewer revs.

We tested an example equipped with the optional AMG appearance pack with 21-inch low profile tyres. The suspension was generally comfortable, though it did fidget over expansion joins in the road.

Steering was light and easy; some drivers may prefer something with more feel.

The Mercedes GLE 300d is a pleasant environment in which to spend your daily commute and weekends away.

But it's no bargain. Make sure you drive VW's excellent 170TDi Touareg too, because it's about $55,000 cheaper. The BMW X5 is also worth a look. ■

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★½☆
Handling
★★★½☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Stunning interior design
- ✔ Strong, economical drivetrains
- ✔ Widescreen digital dash displays
- ✔ Roomy, practical and comfortable interior
- ✔ Option of third-row seats.

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Lots of expensive options
- ✘ Big wheels compromise ride comfort
- ✘ A bit pricey compared with rivals

SPEX (GLE300d)

- Made in the USA
- 2.0-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/ nine speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 180kW of power at 4200rpm/500Nm of torque from 1600-2400rpm
- 0-100km/h in 7.2 seconds (claimed)
- 6.9L/100km combined average. CO2 emissions are 169gkm. Fuel tank is 65 litres
- Maximum towing weight: 2700kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, lane keeping, adaptive cruise control, rear cross traffic alert, 360 degree camera, head up display, adaptive LED headlights, navigation, digital radio, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, digital instruments, voice control, fake leather upholstery, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 68%; 5yr: 52%

compare with ...

BMW X5, Audi Q7, Volvo XC90, Lexus RX, Genesis GV80

MERCEDES-BENZ **G63 AMG** FROM **$368,400**

America has the Jeep Wrangler, Britain has (or had) the original Land Rover Defender and Germany has the Mercedes G-Class. Each started life as a military vehicle in war zones but half a century later they've been modernised to do battle in concrete jungles.

The box-shaped Benz has one key difference. Those crazy Germans insisted on fitting a massive V8 and four loud exhausts (two each side near the rear doors) that make the top-spec G63 sound like a 1930s hot rod. It's a bit like strapping a missile to a mountain goat.

Even the boss of AMG admitted that the previous G63 was a bit of a handful. The exact translation of his comments is not suitable for a family magazine. But Americans loved it, no doubt aided in part by its popularity among the rich and famous. Arnold Schwarzenegger swapped his Hummer for one and countless Hollywood A-listers have a "G-Banger" in their garage, from Justin Bieber to any number of Kardashians.

So it should come as no surprise that the first all-new model in 40 years has taken the level of bling up a notch or three. Inside is a wide-screen, high-resolution digital dash. Leather seats are available with diamond stitching similar to an Aston Martin and the steering wheel is from the C63 AMG sports sedan.

Despite its cube-like design, the G is not much bigger inside than a Subaru Forester, although headroom aces most rivals. The turning circle is a shocker: 13.5m is wider than a double-cab ute or Toyota LandCruiser.

The shape maximises space but has the aerodynamics of a tin shed. Wind noise at freeway speeds will have you feeling melancholy about old Holdens with quarter windows.

However, the twin turbo 4.0-litre V8 matched to a nine-speed auto and dual-range four-wheel drive does a good job of pushing a hole through the air. Easy with 430kW of power and 850Nm of torque.

We matched Mercedes' 0 to 100km/h claim of 4.5 seconds going into a strong headwind. With a tail-wind it clocked 4.3s — in an off-road vehicle that traces its origins to military use.

For 2025, the official claim is an even faster 4.4 second, as the V8 is joined by a 48-volt mild-hybrid system for a 15kW/200Nm boost under acceleration.

If you want to go greener but keep the pace Merc now has the G580e, an EV alternative. With four electric motors it out-thrusts the V8 with 432kW and a stupendous 1164Nm. A body weighing more than three tonnes calms its 0-100km/h claim to 4.7 seconds.

The G63 still handles like a truck, but the new model is better tied down than before. Independent front suspension relaces the previous live axle. Massive 22-inch wheels with sticky tyres keep this 2.5-tonne beast on terra firma. Just.

If you are a bit enthusiastic with the right foot on the exit of, say, a roundabout, the stability control cuts in prematurely.

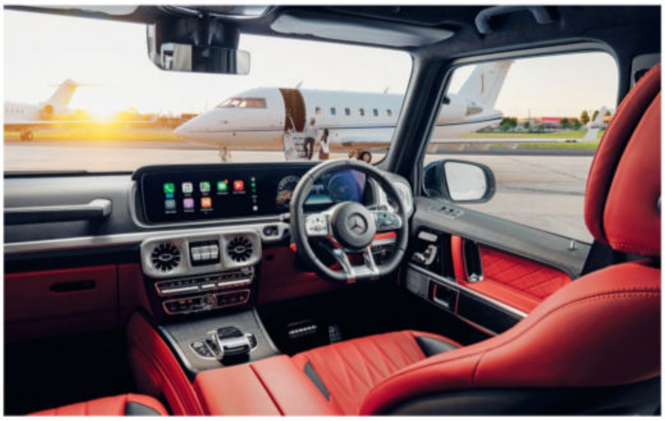
This is fixed by selecting Sport Plus; you still have a safety net but one that's more... err... understanding of your intention.

Ride comfort is better on smooth freeways than bumpy back roads, but buyers likely won't mind as long as they're being gawked at.

As before, the G63 AMG is a car that makes no sense and yet is intoxicating. Buyers queue for it around the world. Despite its more than a third-of-a-million-dollars price tag. Ah, the price of fame. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance:
★★★★★
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★⯪☆☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆



THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ The most insane 4WD in the world
- ✔ Stupendous performance and sound from the V8
- ✔ Much-improved dash
- ✔ High resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It still doesn't like corners much
- ✘ Unforgiving ride
- ✘ You'll shred the tyres if you go off road
- ✘ Cramped interior
- ✘ Ridiculously overpriced
- ✘ Massive thirst

SPEX

- Made in Austria
- 4.0-litre twin-turbo V8/nine-speed automatic/dual-range 4x4
- 430kW of power at 6000rpm/850Nm of torque from 2500-3500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 4.4 seconds
- 11.8L/100km highway; 21.3L/100km city; 98 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 350gkm; fuel tank is 100 litres
- Warranty: Five years/ unlimited km
- Max towing weight N/A
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, adaptive suspension, adaptive LED headlights, 360-degree cameras, sunroof, Nappa leather upholstery, Bluetooth, navigation, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, digital radio, TV tuner, three locking diffs, 22-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 78%; 5yr: 61%

compare with ...

Audi RS Q8, BMW X5M, Porsche Cayenne Turbo, Range Rover Sport SVR

MG **ZS** FROM **$26,990**

The ZS has long been one of the most affordable small SUVs on the market, but until the arrival of the latest model in 2024 it wasn't exactly brimming in substance.

That new-gen model brought with it fresh styling, a far more upmarket cabin and vastly improved driving manners.

The five-door compact SUV looks slicker from outside, too.

Kicking off at $26,990 drive-away for the Excite or another $3000 for the Essence, each gets a very modest 81kW/140Nm 1.5-litre engine.

An Essence Turbo ups that to a more meaningful 125kW/275Nm.

Or you can get the Hybrid+ — in Excite or Essence trim — that adds an electric motor for a combined 158kW and 465Nm. It also pairs with an interesting three-speed auto instead of the CVT of other models.

The entry Excite has a basic level of gear, including 16-inch alloy wheels embedded sat-nav, rear parking sensors, two USB ports and a 10.25-inch infotainment screen.

All others get bigger wheels (17-inches for the Essence 1.5 and Excite Hybrid+, 18s for the Essence Turbo and Essence Hybrid+), a 12.3-inch screen, 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster, rear air vents (there are none on the basic Excite), 360-degree camera, two extra USB ports, rain-sensing wipers, roof rails, smart key entry and a six-speaker sound system (up from four).

The Essence also picks up a leather-wrapped steering wheel, fake leather seat trim, heated front seats, electrically adjustable driver's seat and a panoramic sunroof.

Hybrid models replace a space-saver spare with a repair kit.

We haven't driven the cheapest models but wouldn't be expecting much in the way of performance.

But the Hybrid+ steps it up courtesy of an electric motor.

There's respectable pulling power and a nice effortlessness to the way the electric motor chimes in. Despite decent outputs in a relatively light SUV it never feels overly enthusiastic but gets the job done.

Most of the time, at least.

Drain the 1.83kWh battery — up a hill or with sustained acceleration — and you're relying on the petrol engine a lot more. Instead of being a minor background accompaniment the 1.5-litre four-cylinder becomes the main game, often revving at 3000-4000rpm as it tries to keep things moving and top up the battery.

It's an odd sensation, especially when the engine is revving away when you're only cruising.

It's a bit out of whack with the way a hybrid should operate; some additional tuning would help quell its revvy ways while still delivering fuel savings.

Speaking of which, the hybrid uses a claimed average 4.7L/100km, which is good. And while the city fuel use figure is just 0.9L/100km we never saw anything like that; maybe down a really long hill...

On the road the ZS is predictable and comfortable, although the suspension that tends towards soft can occasionally get out of kilter with the road surface.

And don't expect much dynamic zing. Light steering sets the scene for a car that's easy to maneuver and there's some leaning through corners.

It's not as slick as some of the better SUVs in bends (think Hyundai Kona and Kia Seltos) but is a noticeable step up on the model it steps in for.

So ultimately it's value and a well presented cabin that shines for the new ZS. And while the base car misses out on some worthwhile features, it's other variants that arguably have greater appeal. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Well presented inside and out
- ✔ Decent space by small SUV standards
- ✔ Hybrid system is fairly efficient and offers good performance

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Base model misses out on a lot of gear
- ✘ Base 1.5 engine doesn't have much power
- ✘ Hybrid prone to odd engine revving
- ✘ Dynamics only OK

SPEX (Essence Hybrid+)

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre four-cylinder hybrid system/three-speed auto/front-wheel drive
- 158kW of power/465Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 8.7 seconds (claimed)
- 0.9L/100km city (don't believe it!), 6.9L/100km country, CO2 emissions are 110g/km, fuel tank is 41L, 95 unleaded
- Warranty: 10 years/250,000km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 65%; 5yr: 51%

compare with ...

GWM Haval Jolion, Chery Tiggo 4, Kia Stonic, Hyundai Venue, Mazda CX-3

MG **HS** FROM **$33,990**

The HS is MG's mid-sized SUV that arrives with a tempting price tag, starting at $33,990 drive-away for the Vibe.

For that you get a sizeable five-seater powered by a 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbo engine (a plug-in hybrid model is arriving in 2025) driving the front wheels through a seven-speed twin-clutch automatic transmission.

Standard gear includes 18-inch alloys (with a space saver spare), powered driver's seat, adaptive cruise control, rear parking sensors, digital instrument cluster and a 12.3-inch central infotainment screen with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

There's also a long list of standard safety gear — auto braking in forward and reverse, lane keep assistance, blind spot warning, driver monitoring and rear cross traffic alert — that helped earn it a five-star ANCAP safety rating.

Throw in a ten-year/250,000km warranty and it mounts a serious value case, although keep in mind that if you use the car for commercial purposes — such as Uber driving — the warranty drops to seven years and 160,000km.

Stepping up to the Excite ($36,990) adds 19-inch wheels, faux leather seats, sat-nav, 360-degree camera and front foglights.

By the time you get to the Essence ($40,990) you've got a powered passenger seat, panoramic sunroof, tinted windows, dual-zone climate control ventilation, powered tailgate front parking sensors, wireless phone charging and an extra two speakers for eight in total.

Inside, the HS delivers on space with good storage up front and easy adjustability to the driving position. The perforated steering wheel is indicative of the attention to detail in a cabin that typically looks and feels better than its price tag. You can even option a brown interior for the Essence.

Those in the rear are looked after, too, with generous head and legroom. An almost flat floor ensures decent foot space and there are USB ports to keep the gadgets topped-up.

There's lashings of tech but MG has packed plenty of functionality into that centre screen.

There are various menus to delve into, although you can set some favourite icons at the base of the screen.

Often simple tasks — such as adjusting the ventilation — require a press or two of the screen, which isn't as easy as old school physical controls.

You can program the toggles on the steering wheel to look after commonly used tasks, but it all seems a tad OTT in the interests of removing buttons from elsewhere.

And the lack of a volume dial is a frustration, making the easiest way to make things louder or quieter by using the steering wheel controller.

The compact turbo engine delivers on torque but it's not overly punchy, taking a leisurely 9.6 seconds to hit 100km/h.

It's also not as frugal as some and calls for premium unleaded, taking the shine away from the value on display elsewhere.

Once underway the seven-speed auto is slick in its shifts, but there's the occasional hesitation when taking off.

It's a similar story in the way it deals with bumps and bends. The HS is inoffensive but not as polished as some rivals, especially those from Japan.

There's some leaning through bends and occasionally light and oddly weighted steering that does little to inspire confidence.

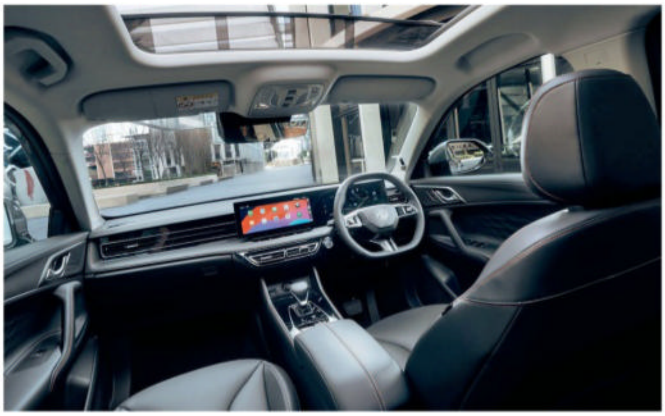
It's OK, but some more tuning and TLC in the chassis department would make a big difference.

Still, as a value-packed all-rounder it's easy to see the appeal in the HS.

The new model undercuts many rivals — on space and features especially — to create a family friendly SUV for those on a budget. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★⯪
Overall
★★★⯪☆



THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Very sharp pricing
✔ Spacious cabin
✔ Decent tech and big screens

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Performance only average and needs premium unleaded
✘ Driver assist systems can be too beepy
✘ Driving manners not as sharp as Japanese rivals
✘ Too much controlled through the centre screen and no volume dial

SPEX (Essence)

- Made in China
- 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbo, seven-speed twin-clutch auto, front-wheel drive
- 125kW of power/275Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 9.6 seconds (claimed)
- 8.9L/100km city, 5.8L/100km country, CO2 emissions are 156g/km, fuel tank is 55L
- Warranty: 10 years/250,000km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 53%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Haval H6, Mitsubishi Outlander, Nissan X-Trail, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage

MINI **COUNTRYMAN** FROM **$49,990**

The Countryman is as big as a Mini gets, bringing mid-sized SUV thinking to the micro car brand.

With five doors and five seats, the SUV brings levels of practicality not experienced before from the German-owned British brand, right down to its 505-litre boot.

There's some smile-inducing touches and playfulness, too, all of which kicks off at $49,990 for the front-drive Core with its three-cylinder turbo engine.

There's a vast model range that takes in all-wheel drive models with a bigger 2.0-litre turbo engine as well as E and SE models powered solely by electricity.

Those EV models top the pricing at up to $77,990 for the dual motor sporty JCW variant that is also available with all-wheel drive petrol propulsion.

In between are Classic and Favoured model variants, each stepping up in price and bringing more equipment.

Yep, choice is something you're not lacking in the Mini range.

Nor are classic Mini touches, such as the Union Jack pattern woven into the tail lights and the modern materials peppered throughout the cabin.

That choice flows through to colours and extras, extras too.

Want black mirrors or roof? No problem. Looking for a lighter shade inside? Done.

The Countryman has a dizzying array of options and extras, which can be a good or bad thing depending on your viewpoint.

And Mini likes to do things differently.

The circular infotainment screen is a cool touch. Even better is how configurable it is, able to display modern-looking displays or something classic Mini.

You can even have some fun with things such as the sound system that allows you to spin a virtual DJ record on the screen.

That fun factor flows through to the way it drives, too.

The little three-cylinder turbo has modest outputs of 115kW and 230Nm.

But it's loaded with character and nicely adheres to the Mini ethos. Having useable torque very low in the rev range in some ways makes up for the modest outputs, too.

The All4 (all-wheel drive) with its 2.0-litre turbo steps things up with 150kW/300Nm for sportier go. It's an engaging machine and one that's never short on grunt.

Grab the JCW model — with its body add-ons and more aggressive design tweaks — and there's a fiery 233kW/400Nm along with a purposeful exhaust note to match.

Dual motor versions of the electric variants get close to the outright performance of the JCW but make it a lot more accessible by delivering up to 230kW and 494Nm almost instantaneously.

It makes for a brisk and fun EV with driving range of up to 460km from the 150kW/250Nm single motor model.

Like all Minis the Countryman has quick steering and a surefooted stance that make it an engaging car on the road.

Sure, it's not as comfy as some and there are SUVs with more space, but as something oozing in personality the Countryman stands out from the vanilla crowd.

While that may not be for everyone — or, at least, everyone's budget — those who take the Mini leap should manage plenty of reasons to smile in the Countryman. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Dizzying array of colours and options
- ✔ Zippy engines and electric motors
- ✔ Fun to drive
- ✔ An interior like no other, starting with the infotainment screen

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Dizzying array of colours and options
- ✘ Better equipped models start adding up
- ✘ Not as big or practical as some

SPEX (Countryman S All4)

- Made in Germany
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/seven-speed auto/all-wheel-drive
- 150kW of power/300Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.4 seconds (claimed)
- 6.3L/100km highway; 9.9L/100km city; 95 premium; fuel tank 54L
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 68%; 5yr: 53
%

compare with ...

Audi Q2, BMW X1, Mercedes-Benz GLA, Volvo XC40, Lexus UX

MITSUBISHI **OUTLANDER** FROM **$37,740**

There are now six models in the Outlander line-up — ES, LS, Aspire, Exceed, Exceed Tourer and new for 2025, the GSR — with a mix of five- or seven-seats and front-wheel-drive or all-wheel-drive.

Prices for petrol-only models start at $37,740 for the base ES front-wheel drive five-seater and top out at $55,190 for the Exceed Tourer AWD seven-seater. They're powered by a 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol engine and eight-step CVT auto developed with partner Nissan.

The plug-in hybrid Outlander, with a claimed EV range of up to 84km, and an exceptionally optimistic claimed fuel consumption of just 1.5L/100km, starts at $57,290 for the ES five seater and runs to $73,790 for the GSR seven seater.

Recent upgrades have finally added rear cross-traffic alert and blind spot warning standard on all models.

The cabin is roomy and all appointments and infotainment controls are mounted high.

The nine-inch infotainment touchscreen is the gateway to wired and wireless Apple Car Play, wired Android Auto and embedded navigation.

The gear shifter is a small electronically-controlled lever, near the electric park brake.

AWD models have a dial to select various driving modes but, with limited ground clearance and low-profile tyres, it shouldn't venture any further than a gravel driveway.

We tested a top of the range Exceed seven-seater. As is the case with most SUVs of this size, these really are temporary seats for kids. Possibly even someone else's kids rather than your own.

The middle row has two ISOFIX child restraints and three top-tether points. Child seats cannot be fitted in the third row, as is the industry norm until you reach certain large SUVs.

On the road the Mitsubishi Outlander is pleasant enough and a big step up from the old model. But that is faint praise.

The new one feels a little more athletic, with sharper steering responses and more confidence-inspiring handling and grip — on a winding country road or a roundabout.

Then there is the matter of fuel consumption. The new Mitsubishi Outlander is heavy and that makes it thirsty.

Driving for economy the best we could average landed between 8 and 9 litres per 100km. The class-leaders return fuel consumption readings closer to 7-8L/100km on the same road loop. The Toyota RAV4 Hybrid sips 4-5L/100km.

Mitsubishi offers a 10-year/200,000km warranty if vehicles are only serviced within the dealer network. Step outside the dealer network for any routine service visit at any point within the five- or 10-year period, and this offer is voided and you revert to a warranty of five years/100,000km.

The ACCC says it is monitoring the conditions placed on this warranty but is yet to take any action or make any adverse findings.

To us, it's a five-year warranty with the option of another five years. But Mitsubishi markets it as a 10-year warranty, with the conditions hidden in fine print.

To sum up, the Mitsubishi Outlander is a massive improvement over its predecessor, but despite the gains, it's not quite up to the standards of the best in class — Toyota's RAV4, Subaru Forester and Honda CR-V — in terms of fuel consumption, refinement, and safety features.

Mitsubishi is charging serious money for an SUV that doesn't quite go far enough. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Looks fast and expensive
- ✔ Roomy, practical cabin
- ✔ Long warranty if you use dealer servicing
- ✔ Made in Japan quality and reliability
- ✔ Comfortable ride

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Doesn't drive as good as it looks
- ✘ Thirsty
- ✘ Conditions apply to the 10 years/200,000km warranty
- ✘ Mid spec and top models are expensive

SPEX (Exceed 2.5)

- Made in Japan
- 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 135kW of power at 6000rpm/245Nm of torque at 3600rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.1L/100km highway; 9.9L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO2 emissions are 170gkm; fuel tank is 55 litres
- Max towing weight 1600kg
- Warranty: Five years/100,000km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, speed zone reminder and sign recognition, navigation, wireless Apple CarPlay, digital radio, 18-inch alloy wheels, full size alloy spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 74%; 5yr: 60%

compare with ...

Toyota RAV4, Mazda CX-5, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Nissan X-Trail

MITSUBISHI **TRITON** FROM **$50,940**

In dual-cab 4x4 pickup guise tested here, the Mitsubishi Triton range kicks off with the GLX, priced from $50,940 plus on-road costs.

All models include a 360-degree camera, tyre pressure monitoring, front and rear cross traffic alert, speed sign recognition and blind spot warning.

GLX+ ($53,290) adds 17-inch alloy wheels, side steps, digital radio tuning, USB power ports in the rear and a rear diff lock.

A new GLX-R grade added for 2025 costs $56,740 and adds 18-inch alloy wheels, black exterior details, door body mouldings, a sports bar, and a leather-wrapped steering wheel and carpet flooring.

The GLX-R also brings the Super Select II 4WD system that allows it to be driven on bitumen in high range all-wheel drive.

GLS models ($59,090) get a plastic tub liner, softer suspension, trim changes, smart key, dual-zone ventilation, wireless phone charging.

Top-spec GSR ($63,840) gets black design highlights, a sailplane, orange accents inside and heated and power adjustable front seats.

The latest Triton features wider tracks and a 50mm wider body that contributes to a big increase in occupant space.

There's a decent smattering of new tech, although Mitsubishi has stuck to an analogue instrument cluster in an era when digital is taking over.

The 9-inch central infotainment display is adequate, but only just. It connects via Android Auto or wireless Apple CarPlay.

A traditional live rear axle/leaf spring rear end is great for load carrying but, as with most utes, not always successful at controlling the tail over bumps.

That said, there's now a level of on-road dynamic ability to Triton that elevates it to within reach of class leaders.

But, of course, the Triton is designed to get down and dirty, something it now does well courtesy of that broader footprint and better controlled body.

GLX has a part-time four-wheel drive system; GLS and GSR get an on-demand drivetrain that allows the car to run in two or four wheel drive (high range) on bitumen.

It's handy on a wet road, and also in rural areas where you're transitioning from gravel to bitumen regularly.

Triton's familiar 2.4-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel up front now has two turbochargers for added grunt.

It's more efficient, too, using a claimed 7.7 litres per 100km.

However the Triton's Euro6 emissions compliant engine requires AdBlue fuel additive; it will generally be added during services (every 12 months or 15,000km), though heavy users — including those towing — may need to top up more often.

The 2.4 is relatively swift, tapping early into its 470Nm torque peak to make for easy progress. Rev it out and there's a class average 150kW, but again it gets the job done without fuss.

The six-speed auto is smooth but ever-eager to pluck a higher ratio — presumably to lower fuel use — in turn leading to hunting on undulating or winding roads, while the stop-start system can be slow and clunky when kicking the engine back into life.

Triton can now tow 3500kg (in theory, but it would be an almighty struggle on a hill) at which point there's still about 600kg of payload left — more generous than some rival utes — and without a trailer all models carry one tonne-plus.

While the 2024 Triton doesn't reset any ute benchmarks, it's now got more going for it than just a cheap price. If Mitsubishi is true to form, expect some sharp drive away deals to keep its competitive advantage on that front, too. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Tough body and solid off-road credentials
- ✔ Large buttons and dials for major controls
- ✔ Willing twin-turbo engine
- ✔ Roof-mounted rear air vents
- ✔ Super Select II 4x4 system suitable for on-road use
- ✔ Generous payload

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Stop-start system isn't smooth
- ✘ Transmission not particularly smart in hilly terrain
- ✘ Back end can get a bit jumpy in rough corner
- ✘ No low tie-down points in the load tray

SPEX (GLS)

- Made in Thailand
- 2.4-litre twin turbodiesel four/six-speed automatic/part or full time 4x4
- 150kW of power at 3500rpm/470Nm of torque from 1500-2750rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.7L/100km highway; 9.6L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 203gkm; fuel tank is 75 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/100,000km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, 360 degree cameras, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, rear cross traffic alert, trailer stability control, nine-inch touchscreen, Android Auto, wireless Apple CarPlay, wireless phone charging, LED headlights, 18-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 73%; 5yr: 59%

compare with ...

Isuzu D-Max, Nissan Navara, Toyota HiLux, LDV T60, Mazda BT50, Ssangyong Musso

NISSAN **NAVARA** FROM **$48,228**

The 4X4 dual-cab pickup Navara range opens with the 140kW/450Nm 2.3-litre turbo/six-speed manual SL at $48,228. The seven-speed auto SL is $50,872, ST is $53,333/$55,833, ST-X is $56,823/$59,323 and the Pro-4X is $59,783/$62,283. Pro-4X Warrior, with a range of chassis improvements and extra equipment aimed at off road use, is $69,143/$71,643.

The 2.3-litre twin turbo's outputs are par for the class but it's noisy, gravelly and a little sluggish in the initial stage of a standing start. In part, though, this is due to the low first and second in the seven-speed box; once past those it does the job easily and with a 1.2-tonne trailer on the back, performance was unaffected.

Fuel economy is excellent, due in large part to the efficiency dividend of seven ratios. Unladen at highway speeds, the test ST-X returned 7–8L/100km; with the trailer it used 10–11L/100km.

Drive goes to the rear wheels and 4WD high can be selected at up to 100km/h on non-bitumen surfaces only. Low range is complemented by a locking rear diff on ST and ST-X, while an electronic LSD function also operates on each wheel.

The chassis is the usual ladder frame with double wishbones up front and an unusual live axle/coil spring rear, located by five links.

Unladen, Navara is one of the better-handling one-tonners. The superior lateral rigidity and lighter weight of the coil-spring rear gives it better stability on rough surfaces, where the Navara doesn't jump around and skip over corrugations like the Triton.

The ride is more compliant than most rivals too, but the steering is lifeless and the brakes only adequate.

The rear coils on the original NP Navara sagged badly under a decent load, and Nissan's claimed maximum payloads and 3500kg maximum towing capacity were, in effect, pure fantasy.

The company has since had a several goes at fixing these issues, first in 2017 with, it claimed at the time, heavier duty suspension, but the improvement was only marginal and there was no increase to GVM or GCM.

An early 2018 update introduced dual rate springs and new dampers, which did deliver a worthwhile improvement.

That said, if you want to tow or carry heavy loads, the old leaf springs are hard to beat. That's why they are fitted to every other truck in Australia.

Ranger and Amarok manage to deliver a pretty comfortable ride on leaf springs as well.

At GVM of 3150kg (ST-X), the Nissan's actual maximum towing weight, if you're going to stay with its legal GCM of 5910KG, is 2760kg, not 3500kg as claimed.

Navara's interior features a comfortable driver's seat, but notable omissions include no reach adjustment for the steering wheel and inadequate covered oddment storage areas.

Autonomous emergency braking, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert and lane keep assist are standard.

Big blokes squat knees-up on the back seat. There's no centre head restraint and rivals such as Ranger and Amarok are wider. The centre section of the rear window opens so your dog can stick his head into the cabin.

The Navara isn't a front-runner in this class, where Toyota's HiLux has the reliable workhorse concept nailed.

Triton usually wins on price, Ranger takes the style/features/size trifecta, the Isuzu D-Max/Mazda BT50 twins score on fuel efficiency, comfort and safety and the new VW Amarok/Ford Ranger's grunt laden 3.0-litre V6 is the best drive in the class, by quite a way. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Green Vehicle Guide
★★★½☆
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★½☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★½☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Great fuel economy
- ✔ Smooth, efficient seven-speed auto
- ✔ Stable on rough roads
- ✔ Comfortable ride
- ✔ Well built and finished

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Coil-spring rear end compromises load carrying and towing
- ✘ Uncomfortable rear seat
- ✘ Front pillars block vision
- ✘ Above-average engine noise and vibration under power
- ✘ Slow off the mark
- ✘ Overpriced

SPEX (ST-X auto)

- Made in Thailand
- 2.3-litre twin turbodiesel/seven-speed auto/four-wheel drive
- 140kW of power at 3750rpm/450Nm of torque from 1500–2500rpm
- 0–100km/h in N/A
- Maximum towing weight: 3500kg
- 5.9L/100km highway; 8.9L/100km city; CO_2 emissions are 186g/km; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, leather-faced and heated front seats, touchscreen audio, Bluetooth, 360 degree cameras, navigation, locking rear diff, 18-inch alloys with 255/60 tyres, LED headlights, dual zone air, sunroof
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 71%; 5 yr: 62%

compare with ...

Ford Ranger, Isuzu D-Max, Mazda BT50, Mitsubishi Triton, Toyota HiLux, VW Amarok

NISSAN **QASHQAI** FROM **$34,665**

Nissan's Qashqai is a Euro-designed and engineered compact SUV.

Qashqai runs a 110kW/250Nm 1.3-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/continuously variable automatic/front wheel drivetrain.

Prices open at $34,665 for the base ST; ST-L is $38,665, the Ti tested here is $42,965 and the Ti-L $48,165,

A hybrid variant, badged e-Power, is priced at $52,365 for the Ti and $54,365 for the N-Design. It uses a petrol engine as a generator, with actual motive power (to the front wheels in this case) supplied by an electric motor.

It's not cheap, but this Qashqai takes a significant step up from its underwhelming predecessor in quality, refinement, engineering sophistication and equipment. A late 2024 update also added more tech and freshened the look.

Ti includes, for example, leather upholstery, heated front seats with a massage function, 12.3-inch touch screen infotainment with navigation and wireless Apple CarPlay, a full length sunroof, Bose audio, hands free power tailgate, automatic parking, wireless phone charging and adaptive LED matrix headlights. So it's pricey, but it's loaded.

Base ST isn't short-changed either, with the same 12.3-inch screen and comprehensive driver assist safety tech (including adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition, active speed limiter and rear AEB), multilink rear suspension, USB A and C ports front and rear and dual-zone ventilation.

Qashqai is one of those Goldilocks-sized SUVs that's small enough to be an easy, manoeuvrable device in the cut and thrust of city traffic and the shopping centre car park. Yet is has enough interior space you can to work nicely for a couple or young family.

Useful features include wide opening rear doors that make it easy to get kids in and out of restraints, a decent sized boot with a low, easy load floor and two reversible, removable panels to configure the space in a variety of ways, big bottleholders in each door, manual air conditioning controls and one of the more user friendly infotainment touchscreen layouts around. If you want to disable driver assist safety aids such as lane keeping, you can — and they stay off until you reactivate them.

On the road, the 1.3 is tuned for flexibility and economy rather than outright performance and in this regard it does the job nicely, needing few revs for responsive, respectable progress and delivering frugal fuel figures — albeit on 95 premium. Eco, Normal and Sport modes adjust the CVT's operation, but it's efficient and unobtrusive in all three.

The e-Power is more convincing, making 116kW and 250Nm for an EV-like surge.

A rigid, lightweight body, independent suspension all round and wide (235/50-19) Continental tyres give this Qashqai superior handling to its predecessor, though in tight corners and when changing direction quickly it feels top heavy and when pushed will understeer with enthusiasm. At highway speeds it's secure and composed, though choppy surfaces can test the soft suspension's control and occasionally disturb the otherwise comfortable, absorbent ride. Around town, compliance is excellent. Qashqai's brakes could use more initial bite and overall power.

The Qashqai is a much-improved small SUV that should be on your test drive list if you're shopping this class, especially if space, practicality, comfort and safety are your major priorities. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Big inside, not so big outside
- ✔ Frugal, refined 1.3 turbo
- ✔ Lots of driver assist safety tech at base model level
- ✔ Comfortable and manouevrable in town
- ✔ Touchscreen is more user friendly than most

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Expensive servicing
- ✘ A bit unwieldy in tight corners
- ✘ Requires 95 premium
- ✘ Brakes need more bite
- ✘ Voice control doesn't get it

SPEX (Ti)

- Made in the UK
- 1.3-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 110kW of power at 5500rpm/250Nm of torque from 1600-3750rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 5.3L/100km highway; 7.5L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 138gkm; fuel tank is 55 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, forward and reverse AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, speed sign recognition, head up display, 360 degree cameras; leather, heated, massage front seats, 12.3 inch infotainment touchscreen, digital instruments, navigation, wireless Apple CarPlay, Bose sound, wireless phone charging, sunroof, hands-free power tailgate, 18-inch alloys, space saver spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 67%; 5yr: 57%

compare with ...

Toyota Corolla Cross, Kia Seltos, Hyundai Kona

NISSAN **X-TRAIL** FROM **$38,025**

Nissan's fourth generation X-Trail, a product of the Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi alliance, shares a platform with Mitsubishi's Outlander.

Like the Outlander it gets a carryover 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol engine, with 135kW of power and 244Nm of torque, matched with a continuously variable automatic transmission (CVT).

But Nissan also offers an innovative hybrid option called E-Power, which uses two electric motors to drive all four wheels with a combined 157kW. There's also a 1.5-litre three-cylinder petrol engine to create electricity (it never drives the wheels), for claimed fuel use of 6.1L/100km.

The X-Trail range opens with the ST, at $38,025. ST-L is $44,465. All-wheel drive, plus two extra rear seats, adds $3040 to ST and $3100 to ST-L.

Standard equipment includes comprehensive safety tech, 8-inch touchscreen infotainment with wired Apple CarPlay and Android Auto and 17-inch alloys. ST-L adds lane keep assist, sliding rear seats, a clever dual-panel, multiple configuration boot, surround monitor and 18-inch alloys.

Ti spec, tested here with five seats and all-wheel drive, is $51,265 and includes a 12.3-inch touchscreen and digital dash, head-up display, wireless phone charging, rear seat air, leather, power tailgate, sunroof and matrix LED headlights, plus a clever rear view mirror that can also display a wide view camera image of what's happening behind you.

Ti-L is the full monty, with Nappa leather, Bose sound and a few other frills, at $54,265.

E-Power models are available as an ST-L ($50,765), Ti ($55,465) and Ti-L ($58,465).

This X-Trail feels much more solid, composed, comfortable and refined on the road than its predecessors. Body rigidity, suspension compliance and control, steering precision and braking are much improved, as is Made in Japan quality, inside and out.

There's ample interior space for five people and all but the ST get 40/20/40 split-folding second row seats; Ti and above also get a clever boot organiser that splits the sizeable load area. Rear seat legroom is generous, there's USB C and A ports, the seat is elevated and wide opening back doors permit easy access.

Up front, a simple, stylish layout is easy to use, including the touchscreen, and there's plenty of handy storage.

On the road the 2.5, though lacking a turbo, does deliver decent pulling power and responsiveness at low to midrange revs thanks to the efficient, smooth CVT transmission.

It has a thirst for premium unleaded though.

Not so with the E-Power, which is more of a fuel miser, although not quite as much as some rivals.

There are two motors and they deliver an EV-like driving experience. Press the throttle and there's a nice surge of instant electric torque, which makes zipping through traffic easy.

Most of the time the petrol engine will also be running to keep the electrons flowing, but it's usually quiet courtesy of noise cancelling technology.

The ride, on quite soft suspension, is smooth and supple on all but the roughest surfaces, when it can jar occasionally. Handling, safe and secure in normal driving, can get a bit loose and nautical if you push the X-Trail hard. But you're in the wrong SUV if you do that on a regular basis.

X-Trail is well-built, comfortable, safe and practical family transport. Put it on your test drive list. ■

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★½☆
Value for money
★★★½☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Reasonably priced, especially AWD seven seater models
- ✔ Well designed for carrying kids and gear
- ✔ Smooth, quiet, comfortable ride
- ✔ E-Power delivers EV-like driving experience
- ✔ Base ST has lots of driver assist safety tech
- ✔ User-friendly control layout

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Runs on 95 premium and has a bit of a thirst for it
- ✘ E-Power not as efficient as hybrid rivals
- ✘ Rivals such as the Forester and RAV4 are better handlers on the open road
- ✘ CVT can take a while to respond when you want rapid acceleration

SPEX (Ti)

- Made in Japan
- 2.5-litre four cylinder petrol/CVT/all-wheel drive
- 135kW of power at 6000rpm/244Nm of torque at 3600rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.5L/100km highway; 10.0L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 183 gkm; fuel tank is 55 litres
- Maximum towing weight 2000kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, adaptive cruise, speed sign recognition, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert and auto braking, surround cameras, lane keep assist, 12.3-inch digital instruments, head up display, wireless Apple CarPlay, wireless phone charging, navigation, leather, power tailgate, sunroof, three zone air, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 70%; 5yr: 59%

compare with ...

Toyota RAV4, Honda CR-V, Subaru Forester, Kia Sportage, Hyundai Tucson, BYD Sealion 6

NISSAN **PATHFINDER** FROM **$59,945**

Nissan's fifth-generation Pathfinder is a large SUV now offered with seven or eight seats.

Both models are powered by a 202kW/340Nm 3.5-litre V6 petrol engine matched with a nine-speed automatic.

Nissan has fleshed out the range to include more affordable variants, now priced from $59,945 for the ST-L driving the front wheels; AWD is $64,445.

The Ti is $68,265 as a front-drive model or $72,765 as an AWD.

Top spec Ti-L AWD, with two individual rear seats replacing the three-person bench, is $82,850.

Pathfinder is an old school big, heavy SUV, not least because it runs a big, thirsty, naturally-aspirated 3.5-litre V6 petrol engine. This is because it's primarily designed for the US market (it's built in America) where large capacity petrol engines are still popular, especially in SUVs. There's no diesel or hybrid variant.

Given that it weighs in at nearly two tonnes, fuel consumption is pretty horrific in town, where you can expect to chew through 14-16L/100km. At least it runs on regular unleaded. On the highway, expect 8-10L/100km.

Servicing is also expensive.

The 3.5-litre V6 needs a prod to get mobile because it lacks the low down pulling power of a turbocharged or hybrid drivetrain. The nine speed automatic can take a while to decide which gear it wants. Paddles are provided so you can do it instead.

Drive modes in the AWD models include Eco/Normal/Sport and Tow. Nissan claims a 2.7-tonnes maximum towing weight, but a diesel will do it much easier and use half the fuel. Off road capability is limited to adjustable traction control modes, including snow, mud and sand.

Pathfinder's ride/handling compromise is well behind the class leaders. Despite quite stiff suspension, it's ponderous, rolls enthusiastically into corners and the Kumho Crugen tyres don't inspire confidence. The ride can be fidgety and terse on rough surfaces. Steering is relatively sharp for a big SUV, but devoid of feel.

Where the Pathfinder shines is in the cabin, where it's one of the most spacious, comfortable wagons on the market. There's ample room for three adults in row two, which is split 60/40 and, in the Ti, has its own air conditioning controls, seat heating, roof vents, window sunblinds and USB connectors, so it's a very happy place for kids.

Each side also slides to adjust legroom, and folds forward at the push of a button — without having to remove a fitted child restraint — for clear access to row three, which is a 50/50 split bench, also with three seating positions. It's one of the more accommodating back stalls around, though three kids would want to be on friendly terms. Roof vents and a USB are also provided.

The boot is huge in five seater mode and there's a large storage compartment underneath.

Comfort and convenience features include all windows up or down using the keyfob, a head-up display, a large infotainment touchscreen, Bose sound, seamless Android Auto connectivity and a power tailgate.

As a drive, the Pathfinder is a long way from the front of the family SUV pack. As a spacious, well thought out kid carrier that's also loaded with safety tech, it's more competitive, but overpriced compared with rivals such as Toyota Kluger, Hyundai Palisade and Kia Sorento. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ A great kid carrier
- ✔ Spacious, comfortable cabin
- ✔ Easy access to row three
- ✔ Huge boot
- ✔ Packed with safety tech
- ✔ Simple, user friendly dash layout

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Overpriced
- ✘ V6 uses a lot of fuel
- ✘ Lacks the torque of hybrid or diesel too
- ✘ Nine speed can be hesitant and slow
- ✘ Tank-like handling
- ✘ Expensive servicing

SPEX (Ti AWD)

- Made in the USA
- 3.5-litre V6 petrol/nine-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 202kW of power at 6400rpm/340Nm of torque at 4800rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 7.6L/100km highway; 14.2L/100km city; 91 regular; CO2 emissions are 234gkm; fuel tank is 71 litres
- Max towing weight: 2700kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise control with speed limit monitoring, lane keeping, 360 degree cameras, rear cross traffic alert, three zone air, navigation, Bose audio, wireless Apple CarPlay, wired Android Auto, wireless phone charging, leather faced upholstery, heated front and rear seats, five USB ports, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys, space saver spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 68%; 5yr: 55%

compare with ...

Toyota Kluger, Hyundai Palisade, Mazda CX-90, Kia Sorento, Mitsubishi Pajero Sport

NISSAN **PATROL** FROM **$90,600**

NISSAN
AOF·945
WARRIOR

Nissan's seven seater Patrol starts at $90,600 for the Ti; the bells and whistles Ti-L is $102,100.

Both are powered by a 298kW/560Nm 5.6-litre petrol V8, with a seven speed automatic and dual range 4x4 drivetrain.

Patrol Warrior, at $105,660, is an off-road tech upgrade with the usual bad boy pimpmobile touches designed to intimidate other drivers. Useful stuff includes a 120kg GVM increase, a 50mm body lift, 40mm wider track, tighter body control, new suspension springs, steel bash plate, towbar and 295/70 Yokohama AT tyres.

When you've got nearly three tonnes to shift you don't want to be at the mercy of an underdone engine. Nissan's V8 has no problem at all doing the job in the Patrol. It drives it to 100km/h in just 6.6 seconds, so it's up there with other rapid behemoths such as the Range Rover Vogue.

The Patrol will pull its 3.5-tonne maximum towing weight easily but fuel consumption will be horrific. On the highway, unladen, I recorded 12–13 litres/100km and in Sydney, 19–20 litres/100km.

Capped-price servicing is available but specified intervals are short: every six months.

Patrol's hydraulic anti-roll system is effective and, for such a monster, it corners in a remarkably flat, tidy manner.

Its ride, though never harsh, is a bit lumpy, especially around town. The overassisted steering is designed for American tastes and there's a trace of shake at speed on bumpy roads. As usual, the brakes are underdone for a vehicle of this size and weight, and on light applications the pedal in the Y62 is unresponsive.

Off-road in low range, the Y62 is as unstoppable as they come. As the suspension is decoupled from the anti-roll system and works through its stroke, the ride is comfortable and the Patrol crawls along in a controlled, surefooted way. If things get tricky, there's a locking rear diff as insurance.

You feel like you're sitting in the captain's chair of a supertanker. Berthing the Patrol in a parking space or navigating a tight, twisting section of bush track, presents similar challenges.

As a result, the surround camera system is useful, as is the blind spot warning feature.

You sit in a huge, wide, well-padded chair that lacks lateral support and has limited travel for those with long legs.

For 2025 there's a new dash that now includes a 12.3-inch touchscreen and a digital speedometer. There's also wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto and a 360-degree camera.

There's vast legroom in row two, which features a comfortable, flat bench split 60/40 and with an adjustable backrest angle.

Air-conditioning vents along the roof and a separate system with controls accessible from row two ensure that all occupants will be comfortable on a hot day.

Access via the 60/40 tumble forward row two is okay, but the back stalls are useless except for small kids in restraints because they are on the floor, so most people will squat rather than sit, with their knees hard up against the row-two seat backs.

The Ti-L's power tailgate opens to a load area which has useful space when all seats are occupied. In five-seater mode you could park a small car in there. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Good value for a big, luxurious off road wagon
- ✔ V8 is a beautiful thing
- ✔ Robust, well controlled suspension
- ✔ Surprisingly tidy on road handling
- ✔ Strong resale values
- ✔ Big fuel tank

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Monster thirst and high CO2 emissions, on 95 octane premium
- ✘ Limited driver's seat travel
- ✘ Frequent, expensive servicing
- ✘ Small row three seats
- ✘ Weak brakes

SPEX (Ti)

- Made in Japan
- 5.6-litre V8/seven-speed automatic/dual range 4x4
- 298kW of power at 5800rpm/560Nm of torque at 4000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.6 seconds
- 11.0L/100km highway; 20.2L/100km city; 95 octane; CO2 emissions are 334gkm; fuel tank is 140 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, adaptive cruise, lane departure warning, LED headlights, keyless entry, tri zone air, navigation, surround cameras, partial leather upholstery, full size alloy spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 75%; 5yr: 67%

compare with ...

Toyota LandCruiser, Land Rover Defender, Lexus LX

PEUGEOT **3008** FROM **$50,075**

Peugeot claims the current 3008 “has moved itself above” mainstream SUV rivals such as VW’s Tiguan, Mazda CX5, Subaru’s Forester and Honda’s CRV, but they’re dreaming.

Start money — $50,075 for the 121kW/240Nm 1.6-litre turbopetrol, six-speed automatic Allure, tested here — is about $10,000 too expensive, as is the $57,400 sticker on the 133kW/250Nm 1.6 turbo, eight-speed automatic GT.

The 3008 is front-wheel-drive only, whereas rivals at this price offer all-wheel drivetrains.

Peugeot’s “Grip Control” system, complete with a Land Rover-style rotary dial on the centre console with Normal, Snow, Mud and Sand modes, is nothing more than adjustable traction control on the front wheels and a set of faux all-terrain tyres. Mud and sand? Please, don’t go there.

All models get Peugeot’s i-Cockpit, comprising a 12.3-inch digital instrument panel, a chunky little F1-look leather-wrapped steering wheel and a hi-res eight-inch touchscreen atop the dash. Mirrorlink, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, wireless charging for compatible phones, digital radio and voice control are included, with main menus accessed via a row of piano key-style switches.

It’s all very techno-wow, beautiful to look at and reasonably intuitive to use. However, AM reception is weak, voice control is hit and miss, and the navigation system won’t accept voice destination entry in Australia. When I tried, it offered to take me to 11 Regent Street, London, instead.

Peugeot has short-changed the Allure by omitting lane keeping, adaptive cruise, automatic emergency braking and blind spot monitoring.

They are included on GT Line, along with automatic high beam and 360-degree view cameras, plus range-wide lane departure warning, distance alert, parking sensors and speed limit recognition.

Froufrou French car touches include “Relax” and “Boost” modes in a “Multi-Sensory Ambience” system, with adjustable mood lighting — the blue is very Paris by night — and a fragrance dispenser in the glovebox.

You look over the wheel at the instrument panel and for an unobstructed view of the digital dials you must position the wheel quite low and the seat high. It feels weird at first, but the elevated instruments are directly in your line of sight, like a head-up display, so as a safety feature it works.

In the back, a low, firm bench, high window sills and tinted glass mean kids will feel like they’re sitting in a cave. Leg room is adequate for most adults.

Softly-sprung, the 3008 offers a quiet, supple ride in town and on the highway.

On rough country roads, it can be fussy and unsettled.

In tight corners the 3008 feels loose and unwieldy, with excessive body roll exacerbated by steering that’s either over-assisted in Normal mode, or heavy and numb in Sport mode. Basic torsion beam rear suspension can struggle for control on rough roads and the brakes, though powerful, are overly sensitive and difficult to modulate.

The Allure’s 121kW 1.6-litre turbopetrol four is refined and tractable but lethargic, especially below 3000rpm. Sport mode improves responsiveness, but most rivals offer better performance.

The six-speed auto has a chunky, pistol grip lever with a heavy action.

On the move it operates unobtrusively, though occasionally slowly, and the test car’s transmission would sometimes judder when put into Park.

The 3008 GT is also available as the Sport, priced at $63,390.

A GT Sport 1.6-litre turbopetrol/plug-in hybrid AWD, with a claimed 164kW and an electric-only range of up to 60km, is priced at a breathtakingly ambitious $82,915. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★☆☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ It’s French, so it looks beautiful and it’s different
- ✔ GT Line is loaded with infotainment, convenience and safety spec
- ✔ Comfortable driver’s seat
- ✔ Smooth and quiet
- ✔ Digital instruments

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Front-wheel drive at all-wheel-drive prices
- ✘ Weak resale values
- ✘ Loose handling on rough roads
- ✘ Sluggish performance
- ✘ Peugeot reliability can be iffy

SPEX (Allure)

- Made in France
- 1.6-litre turbopetrol four/six-speed automatic/front-wheel drive
- 121kW of power at 6000rpm/240Nm of torque at 1400rpm
- 0-100km/h in 9.9 seconds (claimed)
- 5.3L/100km highway; 9.8L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO^2 emissions are 156g/km
- Fuel tank 53 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, lane keeping, blind spot monitoring, radar cruise, automatic emergency braking, 360-degree cameras, LED headlights, 18-inch alloy wheels, Bluetooth, navigation, digital radio, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, 12.3-inch digital instruments, automatic parking
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 42%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-5, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Nissan X-Trail, Toyota RAV4, Volkswagen T-Roc

POLESTAR **3** FROM **$116,754**

The Polestar 3 is the biggest and most luxurious car yet from the fledgling EV brand — and it's a car Polestar hopes can tempt buyers out of some big names for those searching for a large luxury SUV.

Something of a showcase for the design, technology and performance that is at the heart of the electric car specialist, the Polestar 3 is relatively low slung, with an emphasis on style and sportiness.

Priced from $116,754 it comes exclusively as a five-seater, the lack of a third row of seats could hurt it against natural rivals, many of which have seven seats.

For that you get a single 220kW/490Nm electric motor driving the rear wheels. A dual motor model ($131,054) ups that to 360kW and 840Nm.

Step up to the Performance Pack ($142,754) and a software update boosts the maximum outputs to 380kW and 910Nm, in turn lowering the claimed 0-100km/h time from 5.0 seconds to 4.7 seconds.

The Performance model also gets 22-inch wheels in lieu of the standard 20-inch hoops. Plus there's gold-coloured seatbelts and gold Brembo brake calipers.

Both come with plenty of luxury fare and tech, including a 9-inch digital instrument cluster and 14.5-inch infotainment display arranged in a portrait configuration. It runs the Android Automotive operating system so have Google embedded.

There's also a 360-degree camera, wireless phone charging, three-zone ventilation, heated front seats, tyre pressure monitors, panoramic sunroof, electric front seats, powered tailgate and four USB ports.

You can choose various trims and materials inside, all of which are top quality.

The MicroTech seat material looks and feels terrific, or you can go more traditional with Nappa leather.

Dash trim choices include black ash wood or aluminium and those upmarket soft finishes flow elsewhere, too, from mesh-like inserts and the choice of lighter hues, there's a real luxury ambience.

Throw in some Swedish design minimalism — the 4 is built in China but designed in Sweden with plenty of Volvo flavour — and it makes for a seriously upmarket cabin.

Riding on adjustable height air suspension — there's even a high-riding off-road mode, although no spare tyre — the 3 also has a broad footprint.

All of which contributes to its on-road demeanour.

Over bumps it's genuinely plush and comfortable, smothering all but the largest of imperfections.

Even riding on 22-inch wheels there's impressive polish to the way the suspension goes about its business.

It's quiet, too, and the body nicely controlled, making for an easy-to-live-with SUV that feels far more agile and engaging than its on-paper stats may suggest.

It's fun to drive, too, with progressive, well-weighted steering. Electric torque vectoring helps feed drive to the outside rear wheel, helping point the car and endowing it with terrific mid-corner poise.

It's made possible by a clever dual-clutch rear differential that can apportion 100 per cent of the drive to either side of the car.

Dial up sportier drive modes and the dampers stiffen, but not to the point of upsetting the ride.

That ability to provide engaging dynamic ability along with everyday comfort is the real surprise with the Polestar 3.

In dual motor guise the Polestar 3 launches with intent and shuns more than 2.4 tonnes of heft by shoving you back into the nicely bolstered front seats.

Even in eco mode there's decent pull, something made more impressive when you realise it's only the front motor doing the work (the rear is cleverly disconnected temporarily to boost efficiency).

Polestar claims up to 706km, which is huge.

The Polestar 3 is a terrific large SUV, but one that comes at a price and lacks a third row of seats.

Still, with a refreshingly modern design and compelling driving manners it makes the Polestar 3 an interesting alternative among a sea of familiar luxury marques. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★⯪☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Terrific driving manners and comfortable ride
- ✔ Spacious and classy cabin
- ✔ Long EV driving range

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's a large SUV with only five seats
- ✘ It's a lot of money for a brand still finding its feet
- ✘ Options can add up

SPEX (Long Range AWD)

- Made in China
- Dual electric motors/single-speed auto/all-wheel drive
- 360kW of power/840Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.0 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 706km
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, heated and power adjusted front seats, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, BMW iX, Mercedes-Benz EQE SUV, Volvo EX90, Audi Q8 e-tron

POLESTAR 4 FROM $78,500

The Polestar is the luxury EV without a rear windscreen, instead replacing it with cameras that project an image on a display that looks like a regular mirror.

The all-electric five-door from the brand that shares a parent with Volvo has 11 exterior cameras as part of a tech overload that incorporates some Tesla thinking with slick Swedish design.

Priced from $78,500 for the entry level Long Range Single Motor it comes with a sizeable 100kWh battery claimed to take it up to 620km on a charge.

Opt for the Long Range Dual Motor — which doubles outputs from 200kW/343Nm to 400kW/686Nm and costs about $10,000 more — and that range drops to a still impressive 590km.

Sourced from China, the Polestar 4 gets an infotainment system that uses the Android Automotive operating system with inbuilt Google apps and incorporates a 15.4-inch central touchscreen and 10.2-inch instrument cluster.

There's also a vast panoramic roof, head-up display, 360-degree camera, wireless phone charging, power adjustable front seats and electrically reclining rear seats as well as included servicing for the first five years or 100,000km.

The dual-zone ventilation can be set to an oscillation mode to take advantage of the digitally controlled vents — and you can even ask Google to adjust the flow.

The Polestar 4 also has an intense focus on sustainability, which includes a range of innovative materials that create a classy and upmarket cabin.

While leather is available for $7000 — also bringing massaging and ventilated front seats as well but also requiring the fitment of the $8000 Plus Pack that includes a bunch of goodies, including a powered tailgate and heated steering wheel — it's the 3D printed cloth trim and available MicroTech that creates a more modern flavour in the cabin.

The 4's elongated low-slung shape showcases coupe-like vibes outside. The long wheelbase also makes for generous cabin space.

Those in the rear get limousine-like levels of legroom, although the high-ish floor means tall legs may be a tad higher than is typically comfortable. And don't go looking behind to see what's happening in the traffic because all those in the rear see is a dark wall.

The broad boot hides a deep underfloor receptacle and there's a small binnacle under the bonnet that's perfect for charging cables.

Those up front get a clean cabin mostly devoid of buttons, although the large volume dial and associated buttons to control the infotainment is a welcome addition for a car that takes a leaf out of the Tesla playbook by packing so much of the adjustability and functionality into the central screen (which can occasionally be slow to react).

There's a Scandinavian flavour throughout and attention to detail is immaculate, right down to the ambient lighting that includes some star-like patterns on the doors.

The galactic theme continues with various colour options aligned to planets in our solar system. it's a cute touch and reinforces the emphasis on software, which receives regular updates over the air.

Like all electric SUVs there's an effortlessness to the way the Polestar 4 surges off the line.

Even in Single Motor rear-drive guise there's respectable pull and the Dual Motor variant leaps enthusiastically, with all-wheel drive easily harnessing the grunt.

Rear-drive variants get passive suspension that is taut but delivers with good everyday control. Dual Motor models get adjustable dampers that allow you to soften the ride for more cushiness.

Choose the Performance Pack that's only available on Dual Motor models and you get 22-inch wheels that add sharpness over short bumps while stepping up the already excellent grip levels.

While it's not about to rewrite the electric SUV rulebook, the Polestar 4 brings design pizazz and interesting tech to a segment that's embracing electric options. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Classy interior has a Scandinavian flavour
- ✔ Big battery means a long driving range
- ✔ Loads of space for back seat passengers
- ✔ Crisp and smooth driving dynamics

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It doesn't have a rear window
- ✘ Premium prices and options put it in luxury price territory
- ✘ Infotainment screen packs a lot in and can be slow to react

SPEX (Long Range Single Motor)

- Made in China
- Single electric motor/single-speed automatic/rear-wheel drive
- 200kW of power/343Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.1 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 620km
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, BMW iX1, Mercedes-Benz EQB, Kia EV6, BYD Sealion 7, Porsche Macan, Audi Q6

PORSCHE **MACAN** FROM **$128,400**

Porsche's new Macan mid-sized SUV has the mammoth task of turning petrolheads into lovers of clean and quiet electricity.

The second generation of the brand's top selling car has done away with petrol propulsion and instead brings high-performance electric firepower that lays the foundations of a potent driver's car.

The bold move by Porsche to make its top-selling model EV-only comes with a hefty price leap from the original, but there's a commensurate boost in performance courtesy of dual electric motors.

The Macan range kicks off with a single motor rear-drive model known simply as Macan, priced from $128,400 and with an electric motor making 250kW (or 265kW when using launch control) and 563Nm. That's about $35,000 more than the petrol model it steps in for.

The Macan 4 (285kW/650Nm or 300kW with overboost) kicks off at $134,400 while the faster and better-equipped Macan 4S (330kW/820Nm and up to 380kW) is $149,300 and the Macan Turbo (no, there are no turbos...) $179,500. That Turbo makes a supercar-like 430kW/1130Nm, with launch control boosting power to 470kW.

Each gets a 100kWh battery for between 616km and 654km of claimed range. Fast charging from 10 to 80 per cent takes as little as 21 minutes at up to 270kW.

The Macan 4 comes with 20-inch alloys, leather, 360-degree camera, dual-zone ventilation, smart key entry, adaptive cruise control, ambient lighting, adaptive dampers, a powered tailgate, electrically adjustable steering column, heated front seats and electrically adjustable seats with a memory function.

There's also a 12.6-inch curved instrument cluster and a 10.9-inch central infotainment screen powered by Android Automotive, which gives access to a suite of third-party apps — as well as Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity.

The Turbo picks up 21-inch wheels, a panoramic sunroof, quad-zone ventilation, Sport Chrono pack and Porsche Electric Sport Sound for a futuristic synthesised sound. There's also adjustable-height air suspension.

The Turbo has some unique design elements, including non-functioning vents built into the rear bumper and a greyed out "Turbonite" badges.

Porsche also offers its Exclusive Manufaktur customisation program giving owners the choice of a plethora of colours, trims and other options. It touches on everything from interior stitching and different roof linings to a head-up display and the choice of 59 special colours. Another $2700 buys a 10.9-inch display for the front of the passenger.

Despite the sleek profile there's ample headroom courtesy of a seating position that's 28mm lower due to the bespoke EV architecture.

Even in the rear head space is generous, while a near-flat floor maximises foot space. Taller folk may find knees perched higher due to the low seat base, but it's a modest compromise.

It's classy stuff, but the Macan's real highlight is how it drives. Few will have complaints with the effortless thrust — even for 2.4 tonnes of SUV — in any of the all-wheel drive variants. And the Turbo is a weapon.

The jolt on a launch control take-off is laugh-out-loud wild as it scorches to 100km/h in 3.3 seconds.

It backs up that stupendous shove with surefooted dynamics.

Prodigious grip, fluid steering and terrific body control courtesy of an uber low centre of gravity cement it as a luxury SUV with immense talent.

An electronically locking rear differential on the Turbo and well sorted electronic aids helps fire the Macan out of corners with clinical efficiency and pace.

With more power going to the rear wheels there's also some sports car flavour in the way it behaves.

There's also available rear axle steering that tucks the corner through tight bends, adding to the agility.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the new Macan is convincing some that electric is a suitable replacement for pistons and turbos that have served fast SUVs so well until now.

One prod of the throttle should help with the argument.

But such indulgence and pace doesn't come cheap. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★★
Handling
★★★★⯪
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Luxury cabin with loads of space
- ✔ Brilliant driving dynamics with lashings of luxury included
- ✔ More power than anyone will ever need in an SUV
- ✔ It charges almost as fast as it goes

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Prices are up tens of thousands more than its predecessor
- ✘ Lengthy list of options quickly ramps prices up further
- ✘ Some people will not be ready for an EV
- ✘ Short three-year warranty

SPEX (Macan 4)

- Made in Germany
- Dual electric motors/single-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 285kW of power (300kW with overboost)/650Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.2 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 624km
- Warranty: 3 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, heated and power adjustable front seats, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, leather, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 74%; 5yr: 61%

compare with ...

BMW iX3, Mercedes-Benz EQC, Audi Q6 e-tron, Polestar 4, Tesla Model Y, Genesis GV70 Electrified

PORSCHE **CAYENNE** FROM **$144,900**

The Porsche Cayenne was overhauled late in 2023, with performance upgrades and styling tweaks inside and out.

Porsche also reintroduced the V8 engine in the S variant, the top seller across a broad range that incorporates 3.0 litre turbo V6 and 4.0 litre twin turbo V8 ICE and hybrid options, plus a potent 4.0 litre twin turbo V8-powered Turbo GT range topper.

Priced from $144,900 for the entry-level 3.0 litre turbo V6 Cayenne wagon (or $153,300 for the coupe), there's a Porsche price premium over predominantly German-badged alternatives.

Whereas some rivals offer three rows of seats, Cayenne is capped at two rows in both wagon and coupe bodystyles.

The base Cayenne comes with real leather, head-up display, matrix LED headlights and a new 12.6-inch curved digital instrument cluster with customisable layouts, one of which mimics the circular dials of classic Porsche sports cars. The steering wheel is also used in the 911.

The 3.0 litre V6 turbo E-Hybrid wagon sells from $164,800 (coupe $171,400) and brings a 130kW/460Nm electric motor for short range EV-only driving. There's also a more powerful S E-Hybrid ($187,800/coupe $194,700).

The 4.0 litre twin turbo V8 ICE S is the sweet spot, priced at $184,900 (coupe $194,700) and adding a panoramic sunroof, ventilated front seats and a punchy Bose sound system. The V8 Turbo E-Hybrid is $303,300 (coupe $312,300).

The V8 produces 349kW and 600Nm for a 0-100km/h blast in 5.0 seconds. Brisk, although short of the ballistic 3.3 seconds for the Turbo GT, and marginally outdone by the E-Hybrid (4.9 seconds) and S E-Hybrid (4.7 seconds) models that pair an electric motor with a V6, and the V8 E-Hybrid at 3.7 seconds.

The 2024 Cayenne amps up the Porsche brand's signature excitement and driving spirit, two big tempters for buyers ahead of the model's eventual switch to electric-only propulsion.

More than anything, though, it's the new soundtrack that delivers the theatre and aural energy of the V8 ICE Cayenne S. Quad exhausts produce a throaty thrum that peaks to a purposeful snarl, although somehow a more aggressive bark seems in order for a Porsche.

The eight-speed auto is beautifully calibrated and in more aggressive drive modes holds gears longer and downshifts in preparation for corners.

If you don't need the V8 chest-beating then the entry-level Cayenne provides thoroughly respectable performance, albeit lacking the brawn some may expect from the Porsche badge.

No such complaints with the Turbo GT — priced at $364,700 and available only in the sleeker Coupe body style — which unleashes 485kW/850Nm of brutal V8 thrust.

Through corners, too, the Cayenne is more capable than almost 2.2 tonnes of go-fast SUV deserves to be. The S variant on standard 21-inch tyres provides excellent grip and the Turbo GT ramps it up with stickier 22-inch rubber while maintaining a surefooted poise.

There's a growing luxury focus reinforced by revised air suspension on S models and above. It's impressively supple and makes for a comfortable tourer.

Adjustable dampers stiffen the ride for added control that more assertively harnesses the sharp, well weighted steering.

Porsche also includes a gravel drive mode that raises the body by 55mm for LandCruiser-like clearance, although the space saver spare, modest suspension travel and performance-focused tyres provide a natural, and very low, limit to off-bitumen adventures.

Now that the Macan has gone electric the Cayenne could prove more popular — and with good reason. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★★⯪
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ As a performance/handling package, the best big luxury SUV out there
- ✔ Added performance and snarl of the V8 in the S model
- ✔ Impressively supple air suspension ensures luxury as well as pace
- ✔ Loaded with standard equipment

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Options can quickly add to already premium prices
- ✘ The V8 is thirstier than the V6 it replaces
- ✘ Removal of some physical buttons detracts from cabin usability
- ✘ No seven seat option
- ✘ Shortest warranty on the market

SPEX (V8 S)

- Made in Slovakia
- 4.0-litre twin turbo V8/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 349kW of power at 6000rpm/600Nm of torque from 2000-5000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 5 seconds (claimed)
- 9.4L/100km highway; 17.3L/100km city; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 281gkm; fuel tank is 90 litres
- Max towing weight 3500kg
- Warranty: Three years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, automatic parking, trailer sway control, navigation, wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, wireless phone charging, heated and cooled front seats, sunroof, power tailgate, 20 inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 55%

compare with ...

BMW X5, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Audi Q8, Range Rover Sport, Maserati Levante

RAM **1500** FROM **$141,950**

The Ram 1500 is Australia's most popular full-size American pickup and now the fifth-generation DT-series has come in for its midlife update. But only two versions of the big factory-backed, locally-converted 4x4 dual-cab have so far been released.

Laramie Sport pricing is unchanged at $141,950, but the top-shelf Limited costs $3000 more than before at $159,950. Versions of the cheaper Big Horn and Laramie are expected to follow in 2025.

The headline act of the upgraded MY25 Ram 1500 lineup is the Stellantis group's new 3.0-litre twin-turbo inline six-cylinder petrol engine in two states of tune, both offering better performance and efficiency than the trusty 5.7-litre Hemi V8 it replaces.

For the Limited, you get the 'High Output' (HO) version which pumps out 403kW and 707Nm and consumes 11.79L/100km of premium unleaded from a 125-litre fuel tank.

The Laramie Sport's Standard Output (SO) engine has figures of 313kW, 635Nm and 10.74L/100km, requires only regular 91-octane petrol, and has a smaller 98L fuel capacity.

Both variants come standard with an eight-speed torque converter automatic, dual-range transfer case and four-wheel drive, but while the SO powertrain has an on-demand system, the Limited gets full-time 4x4.

Of course, both Ram 1500s also match the 3500kg tow capacity of Australia's most popular mid-sized utes with a 50mm tow bar, but with a 70mm ball the Limited can haul up to 4200kg and the Laramie Sport as much as 4500kg.

The downsized engine increases payload by 81kg to 782kg in the Limited, and by 113kg to 863kg in the Laramie Sport.

Standard utility equipment includes a soft roller cover, spray-in liner for the 5'7" tub, push-down rear quarter step, RamBoxes, a one-touch powered tailgate and a tow hitch.

The 2025 facelift also brings freshened front-end styling across the range, a bigger 14.4-inch portrait-style central infotainment touchscreen (up from 12.0-inches) with both wired and wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster, and even a new 10.25-inch multimedia touchscreen for the front passenger.

Rounding out the high-tech package are dual wireless smartphone chargers, a cracking 19-speaker Harman Kardon sound system, super-sized panoramic sunroof and auto-deploying and retracting side steps.

They make it much easier to enter the Ram's enormous, leather and carpet lined cabin, which offers throne-like front seats and more legroom, headroom and shoulder room than a limousine.

With a full range of safety equipment and an esky-sized centre console bin — complete with sliding tray — ahead of a massive soft-padded centre armrest, about the only thing missing here is electric steering column adjustment.

The flagship Limited goes even further with bigger 22-inch alloy wheels, three-mode air suspension, LED headlights and tail-lights, proximity lighting with Ram logo projection, massaging seats and a digital rear-view mirror.

And although it's quicker and undercuts the old Ram 1500 V8's 0-100km/h time of about 7.5 seconds by at least two seconds, the Laramie Sport is no slouch either, easily posting sub-6.0-second figures.

The Laramie Sport also offers better ride comfort on its smaller 20-inch wheels and coil springs, and although neither straight-six Ram can match the engine note of the old V8, both of them use less fuel than the V6s in the rival Ford F-150 and Toyota Tundra.

The Chevrolet Silverado 1500 is the last remaining V8 in this segment but offers less power and is thirstier, although it's more affordable even in ZR2 form. The F-150 is cheaper again, while the Tundra tops the lot.

Service intervals are 12 months or 12,000km, but there's no capped-price servicing and only a three-year, unlimited-kilometre warranty (including roadside assistance), matching the Silverado but not Ford's and Toyota's five-year, unlimited-kilometre warranty. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ More performance
- ✔ Lower fuel consumption
- ✔ Improved multimedia and safety

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ No more V8 rumble
- ✘ Shortish warranty
- ✘ Still pricey and thirsty

SPEX (Laramie Sport)

- Made in USA
- 3.0-litre twin-turbo petrol inline six-cylinder
- 313kW of power/635Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.7 seconds (as tested)
- Claimed average fuel use is 10.74L/100km, regular unleaded, fuel tank is 98L
- Warranty: Three years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, AEB, adaptive cruise control, blind-spot monitoring, fatigue monitoring, 20-inch alloy wheels, LED headlights, panoramic sunroof, power tailgate with one-touch close, automatic side steps, 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster, 14.4-inch infotainment touchscreen, 10.25-inch front passenger infotainment touchscreen, wireless Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, dual wireless smartphone charger, 19-speaker Harman Kardon sound system
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 76%; 5yr: 64%

compare with ...

Chevrolet Silverado 1500, Ford F-150, Toyota Tundra

RANGE ROVER **EVOQUE** FROM **$78,031**

In the distant future, automotive historians will look back at the original Evoque as a turning point for social-climbing small SUVs.

Endorsed by Victoria Beckham, the petite premium Brit became the darling of the *Goop!* generation, with its hotly-received looks influencing subsequent Range Rovers since.

That's why the second generation looks almost identical, yet is all-new bar some powertrains. Slightly larger in every dimension, the current Evoque brandishes a glitzy interior redesign, more rear-seat and boot space.

The Evoque lineup is down to two drivetrains, with the mild hybrid turbodiesel no longer available.

A 2.0-litre turbopetrol powers the base 184kW/365Nm P250 R-Dynamic SE, priced at $78,031.

It's also used in the HSE, priced at $85,485, and the Autobiography at $96,935.

Drive goes to all four wheels in high range only via a nine-speed automatic transmission.

Land Rover's plug-in hybrid tech features a 1.5-litre three cylinder turbopetrol engine, eight-speed auto, rear mounted electric motor and a 15kWh lithium-ion battery that is claimed to offer an electric only range of up to 62km.

It's available in the Evoque P300e, priced at a breathtaking $106,334 in R-Dynamic HSE trim and $115,634 for Autobiography.

Recharging at home, from a power point, is claimed to take six and three quarter hours.

On dirt, Evoque's Terrain Response 2 system can automatically select modes like gravel, mud, sand and snow as required.

Approach angles rise, departure angles fall, while ground clearance (212mm) and wading depth (600mm) increase.

All model grades include autonomous emergency braking, lane-keep assist and traffic sign recognition, as well as twin touchscreens and digital instruments. Some familiarity is required but it all works well enough.

Configurable 'Pivi' touchscreen infotainment is also standard, enhancing an obviously more spacious cabin that looks and feels richer than ever, backed up by an excellent driving position, firm but supportive seating, thoughtful storage solutions and an impressive degree of isolation from the outside world.

Driver-assist safety tech such as blind-spot monitoring and rear cross-traffic alert is now standard. 'Clear Sight Ground View' projection of the terrain directly ahead and below (as if the bonnet is invisible) on to the rear view mirror for safer progress, plus rear-view mirror tele screen broadcasting what's directly behind (for dramatically clearer views in any environment or time of day) and adaptive dampers are optional.

While commendably muted, smooth and economical, the plug-in hybrid is leisurely off the line, until its prodigious, electric-assisted torque kicks in for more rapid responses. That said, the 0-100km/h trip takes a quickish 6.3 seconds, and in hybrid mode Land Rover claims WLTP fuel economy of just 2.0-litres per 100km.

The sweet-spinning petrol engine, meanwhile, doesn't quite have the sheer muscle of its hybrid sibling when overtaking, as evidenced by a 0-100km/h time of 7.6 seconds.

Over twisty turns, the petrol-powered models offer an edge, with their 300kg weight advantage and more precise handling, though all Evoques enjoy tenacious grip. The tautly-sprung R-Dynamic suspension, now standard, gives the littlest Rangie nearly car-like cornering agility, but beware that the suspension can feel too stiff over rougher roads.

Overall, then, the second generation Evoque is more of the same in a quieter, roomier and more tech-heavy package.

Now, Evoque offers an even greater breadth of abilities commensurate with the brand's glamourous reputation — whether uptown or down some dirt track.

Just remember, even for a luxury small SUV, this social climber doesn't come cheap. ▪

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★ EuroNCAP
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★⯪☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Iconic Evoque styling
- ✔ Surprising off-road capability
- ✔ R-Dynamic chassis
- ✔ Comfy, supportive seats
- ✔ Muscular performance

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Big money for a small SUV
- ✘ Limited side and rear vision due to shallow glass areas
- ✘ Stiff ride on bigger wheels without adaptive damper option

SPEX (P250)

- Made in England
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/nine-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 184kW of power at 5500rpm/365Nm of torque at 1300-4500rpm
- 0-100km in 7.6 seconds (claimed)
- 6.8L/100km highway, 10.6L/100km city; 95 octane; CO2 emissions are 191g/km. Fuel tank is 67 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Max towing capacity is 1800kg
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, pedestrian airbag and de-ployable bonnet, AEB, cruise control with speed limiter, engine stop/start, lane keep assist, traffic sign recognition, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, surround cameras, parking sensors, LED headlights, dual-zone air, navigation, WiFi hotspot, Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, part-leather upholstery, 20-inch alloys, space-saver spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 54%

compare with ...

Audi Q3, BMW X2, Jaguar E-Pace, Lexus UX, Mercedes-Benz GLA, Volvo XC40, VW T-Roc

RANGE ROVER **SPORT** FROM **$139,000**

The Range Rover Sport slots in between the mid-size Range Rover Velar and the much larger mega-luxury Range Rover.

Despite growing in size, the latest iteration does without three rows of seats, instead limiting capacity to five.

There's a dizzying model range encompassing 3.0-litre six cylinder turbodiesel and turbopetrol mild hybrid drivetrains, a potent 4.4-litre twin turbo V8, and a plug-in hybrid that can run on electricity alone for short distances.

Those various drivetrains can, with a few exceptions, be matched to four primary trim levels: SE, Dynamic SE, Dynamic HSE and Autobiography.

Prices kick off at $139,000 plus on-road costs for the P360 Dynamic SE (the numbers denote horsepower) that comes with 21-inch alloy wheels, leather, heated and electrically adjusted front seats and a Meridian sound system.

The lineup tops out at $359,715 for the 4.4-litre twin turbopetrol V8-powered P635 SV. It's a beast, with 467kW/750Nm and a claimed 0-100km/h time of just 3.8 seconds.

We're testing the PHEV P460e, which costs $188,100 as a Dynamic HSE or $211,488 in Autobiography.

Each is beautifully appointed with the sort of modern luxury flavour that creates a very upmarket SUV.

The integration of tech — from screens and touchpads to dials and lights — is excellent and the cabin has a rich, upmarket ambience. The curved 13.1-inch centre screen is indicative of the attention to detail.

Plush and supportive seats reinforce that sentiment.

And there's no shortage of space; even in the back there's ample headroom and the same luxury flavour on display up front.

On the road, the Sport's luxury character continues. It's supremely quiet and seriously plush over bumps.

And while there's a lot of weight — try 2660kg — it doesn't feel as fat as that on the move.

In hybrid mode there's ample thrust from the petrol/electric combination. Left only to the electric motor, progress is a lot more leisurely.

Sure, you'll amble around town OK, but on the open road it's unconvincing.

When you've used the claimed 96km of electric-only range, it's not particularly efficient as a hybrid, with the 3.0-litre straight six turbopetrol using many multiples of its fanciful, claimed 1.6 litres per 100km.

If you're bold enough to venture off-road you'll find an immensely capable machine with a towering 280mm of ground clearance and the ability to drive through 900mm of water.

Clever traction management systems ensure effortless progress, as does the terrain mode selector that tailors the various electronics to the situation.

The Sport's 21- and 22-inch road-biased tyres, however, are completely wrong for off-road work. At least there's a full-size spare.

Land Rovers have a less-than-stellar reputation for reliability and the array of tech and electronics has the potential to raise your heart rate and lower your bank balance if you're venturing beyond the city limits or as the car ages, especially when the warranty expires. There's also little in the way of regional service support, and servicing is expensive.

The pros and cons add up to a supremely capable SUV that delivers on luxury and style but is expensive, carries reliability baggage and is unlikely to have its off road talents genuinely tested by most owners. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★⯪☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★★
Value for money
★★⯪☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Stylish inside and out with high quality finishes and materials
- ✔ Luxurious ride makes for limo-like comfort
- ✔ Excellent dynamics for an SUV that's also adept in the rough stuff
- ✔ Clever drive modes tailor the complex electronics to the terrain and situation

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's not cheap and the options list is long
- ✘ Low profile tyres aren't suited to off-roading
- ✘ PHEV doesn't have much grunt in EV mode and is thirsty in hybrid mode
- ✘ Questionable reliability

SPEX (Dynamic SE)

- Made in the UK
- 3.0-litre in line turbopetrol six/PHEV/eight-speed automatic/permanent dual range 4x4
- 460kW of power at 5500rpm/660Nm of torque from 2000-5000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 5.5 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum EV range: 96km
- Claimed fuel consumption in hybrid mode: 1.6L/100km; 95 premium; CO2 emissions are 37gkm; fuel tank is 71.5 litres
- Maximum towing weight: 3000kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, front and rear cross traffic alert, 360 degree cameras, leather, heated and ventilated seats, power tailgate, 13.1-inch touchscreen infotainment, navigation, wireless Apple CarPlay, Android Auto and phone charging, adaptive LED headlights, 22-inch alloys, full size spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 74%; 5yr: 53%

compare with ...

Porsche Cayenne, BMW X5, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Audi Q8, Genesis GV80

RENAULT **KOLEOS** FROM **$42,500**

French car maker Renault is vying for the hearts and wallets of SUV-obsessed Australia with the second-generation Koleos.

Kicking things off is the Zen CVT 4x2 (for front-wheel drive) from $42,500, with 360 degree parking sensors, heated front seats (electric adjustability for the driver), keyless entry/start, walk-away self-locking, navigation and a power tailgate.

There's also autonomous emergency braking, blind spot monitoring and lane departure warning, automatic air, automatic high beam LED headlights and wipers, 18 inch alloys and tyre-pressure monitoring.

Intens 4x2 at $46,000 and Intens 4x4, from $48,500, include Arkamys sound.

Rivals such as the Kia Sportage, Toyota RAV4, Nissan X Trail and Subaru Forester offer superior safety specification, especially at base-model level.

Koleos is one of the most spacious SUVs in its class, offering comfy high-set seating — ground clearance is a lofty 213mm, affording excellent all-round views — and impressive rear-seat legroom.

Modern, clear instruments, ample ventilation, heaps of storage, and a sizeable luggage area (from 458 litres to 1690 litres with the back seats folded) further press home the Renault's family-friendly nature.

Except for the initially confusing touchscreen interface and indicator stalk placed on the left side, there is nothing here to scare away new-to-Renault prospectors.

Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are standard, along with stand alone voice control and two USB sockets.

Conversely, there is nothing French beyond the badge, since the Koleos is basically a reboxed Nissan X-Trail (the recently superseded model, not the latest model tested on page 106) made in South Korea. So if you're a happy Clio or Megane owner desiring the Euro SUV experience (as offered by the Peugeot 3008, Skoda Karoq and VW Tiguan) you might be disappointed.

Petrol versions are powered by a 126kW/226Nm 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol engine used in the Nissan X-Trail for yonks.

Driven in bestselling Zen 4x2 guise, the Koleos is an unassuming performer.

The CVT automatic is tuned to make the most of the Japanese powertrain, providing lively off-the-line performance and a steady stream of acceleration response as required.

Press harder on the throttle, though, and the 2.5 becomes noticeably vocal, and yet there isn't the expected amount of power available at speed.

And while the steering is light enough to make parking easy, it lacks sufficient weight and feel to ever engage keener enthusiasts. There is no joy at all to be had with this car's handling.

Worse still, the suspension and 18-inch alloy wheels combo is just too bumpy and loud on anything other than smooth roads; again, this is at odds with the brand's usual supple ride.

The MkII Koleos offers proven mechanicals clothed in an attractive, spacious body, but with sub-par performance, ride and refinement. VW's Tiguan and its the Skoda Karoq twin under the skin are much better — and 100 per cent genuine — Euro SUVs, while Nissan's excellent new X-Trail, launched in 2023, is effectively what the next Koleos will become in the not too distant future. So why would you buy this superseded version, and wear the added pain of sub-par resale values? ■

STARS ★★⯪☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★☆☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★⯪☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

✔ Striking design
✔ Roomy interior
✔ Generous warranty
✔ Very easy to drive
✔ Comfortable seats

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

✘ Sluggish performance
✘ Weak resale values
✘ Firm ride on 18-inch wheels
✘ Light and lifeless steering
✘ Complicated central screen functionality

SPEX (Zen 4x2)

- Made in South Korea
- 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 126kW of power at 6000rpm/226Nm of torque at 4400rpm
- 0–100km in 9.5 seconds (claimed)
- 6.7L/100km highway, 10.4L/100km city; 91 octane; CO_2 emissions are 188g/km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Fuel tank is 60 litres
- Max towing capacity 2000kg
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, cruise control with speed limiter, Hill Start Assist, camera, rear parking sensors, automatic air, automatic headlights, rain-sensing wipers, 7.0-inch multimedia screen, Bluetooth phone and audio streaming, AUX ports, two USB ports, leather-wrapped steering wheel, fog lights, LED daytime running lights, 19-inch alloys, tyre-pressure monitoring, full-size spare wheel
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 54%; 5yr: 41%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-5, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Nissan X-Trail, Peugeot 3008

RENAULT **MEGANE E-TECH** FROM **$54,990**

The Megane E-Tech is a compact electric crossover that straddles the SUV and hatchback spaces.

With a mostly aluminium body (chosen for light weight) the E-Tech started as an expensive way to get into the EV space but was quickly repriced to $54,990 (there are often deals sharper than that).

For that you get 20-inch alloy wheels, dual-zone ventilation, heated front seats, heated steering wheel, ambient lighting and an interior rear vision mirror that can turn into a mirror. There's also fake leather trim on the sides and backs of the seats and on the doors.

There's also a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster that can toggle between two layouts. A 9.0-inch central infotainment screen incorporates wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

A nicely positioned wireless phone charger means no need to plug in but there are also four USB-C ports.

Rear vision is seriously limited by the tiny back window, but tech has come to the rescue. Flick the central rear vision mirror and it toggles from a mirror to a screen that provides a broader field of vision.

Delve into the settings on the screen and you can tailor various functions, including the choice between Neutral, Pure and Expressive for the pedestrian warning sound. Each a variation on a futuristic whir.

Plus you can activate the air purifier and set the locks and lights to your preferences.

But you're manually adjusting the seats and lifting the tailgate.

The E-Tech also comes with a Type 2 to Type 2 charging cable that can be plugged into a suitable home wallbox or a public AC (slower) charger.

The cabin is a mix of modern materials, grey plastics (28kg of which is recycled) and some bright stitching. There's some fake leather on the backs and sides of the seats, although the textured material you sit on — similar to what's spread across the dash — looks and feels classier.

Being more of a crossover than a traditional SUV there's a lower seating position than some rivals. Those up front are well catered for space-wise and there's a vast low-profile centre console that increases the sense of space.

Things are a lot less generous in the rear. Head and legroom are bordering on tight and three across the rear could stretch friendships. There's also minimal under seat space for feet if those up front have a low seating position.

Plus the attention to detail that is bubbling away up front stops mid-way through the car; the suede like strip on the front doors is replaced with plastic on the back doors and ambient lighting hasn't made it aft.

The boot is a modest-by-SUV-standards 400 litres, although the deep cavity is more useful than its raw numbers may suggest.

The Megane EV gets a single 160kW/300Nm electric motor driving the front wheels. There's thoroughly acceptable pull where it makes most sense, although it never feels sharp when accelerating from a standstill, instead building pace with a more relaxed nature.

While it's never lacking, it also never feels particularly sporty in a straight line.

Reapplying the accelerator on the run unleashes more of that EV feistiness and makes the Megane E-Tech a useful device for zipping around the suburbs. Driving through the front wheels can occasionally challenge the Goodyear rubber on a wet road, though.

There's less of an issue on dry surfaces. Steering is relatively sharp, which adds to the fun factor, and the Megane has an agile driving manner, something no doubt helped by its circa-1.7-tonne kerb weight, which is relatively light by modern EV standards.

Low profile 20-inch tyres deliver on grip, although there's the occasional clumsiness to the ride through chunky sections of bitumen.

The E-Tech is powered by a 60kWh battery good for 454km of range. It can be fast charged at up to 130kW for a 15-80 per cent top-up in as little as 30 minutes.

The Megane is a stylish addition to the EV market that doesn't set any benchmarks but still has plenty going for it, much of it on the design side. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Compact size and some flair to its design
- ✔ Sharp dynamics makes it fun to drive
- ✔ Nicely presented cabin, up front at least

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Not as zippy as some
- ✘ Back seat space is tight
- ✘ Front-drive dynamics not as cohesive as rear-drive EV alternatives

SPEX

- Made in France
- Single electric motor driving the front wheels
- 160kW of power/300Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 7.4 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 454km; battery capacity is 60kWh
- Warranty: 5 years/100,000km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, wireless phone charging, digital radio, digital rear view mirror, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 51%; 5yr: 37%

compare with ...

Tesla Model 3, BYD Atto 3, Cupra Born, XPeng G6, MG4, Leapmotor C10, Geely EX5

SKODA **KAMIQ** FROM **$33,990**

Skoda's Kamiq shares familial DNA and hardware with VW's T-Cross and T-Roc. However as is usually the case with Skoda, it has enough points of difference to make it more than just a badge-engineering exercise.

The model range has been cut back to two, starting with the Select at $33,990. For that you get the same 85kW 1.0-litre three cylinder turbopetrol/seven-speed dual clutch automatic/front-wheel drivetrain as the T-Cross and Polo hatchback.

There's also a Monte Carlo with VW's 110kW 1.5-litre turbopetrol four-cylinder also driving the front wheels, at $41,690.

Size-wise, Kamiq's wheelbase — the critical measure that determines interior space — is longer than T-Cross and T-Roc and closer to the the Tiguan.

So rear seat legroom and boot capacity are at the expansive end of the small SUV class.

You won't find a comparably-priced rival with more luxe or tech than the base Kamiq. Adaptive cruise, digital instruments, slick, hi-res touchscreen infotainment, dual zone air, keyless entry and starting and alloys are standard (17-inch for the Select, 18s for the Monte Carlo). The Monte Carlo adds a powered tailgate, ambient lighting and matrix LED headlights. Clever, practical Skoda touches include a removable torch, double-sided floor mat and load restraining nets in the boot and a brolly in the driver's door.

Tall drivers can get comfortable without restricting rear seat legroom for passengers.

Two Type C USB sockets, vents and storage pockets/door bins are also provided in the back.

Stand alone voice control and navigation are missing; you can use both functions in your phone via another two Type C USB connectors on the dash. The control layout is stylish, efficient and intuitive, apart from clumsy, complicated touch screen adjustment for some air conditioning functions and weak AM reception that's also plagued by electrical interference.

Kamiq's ride is tolerable though quite firm in town; compliance improves at speed and the suspension works particularly well on rough country roads.

VW's 1.0-litre turbo triple is the little engine that could. It has amazing grunt for its size and does the business willingly and efficiently in town, albeit with an occasional case of the yips due to a slightly tardy automatic stop/start fire up and the seven-speed's characteristic momentary hesitation when moving off from rest.

The seven-speed keeps it in the broad midrange sweet spot with crisp, timely shifts. The 0-100km/h trip takes a claimed 10.1 seconds, which tells you that when the triple's torque is exhausted, there ain't much power to take up the fight.

It cruises easily at 100km/h where it's also remarkably smooth and quiet.

It's also frugal, averaging high fours on the highway and single figures in town. Premium fuel is recommended.

Kamiq's long wheelbase, firm suspension and grippy Goodyear tyres give it a sporty, planted attitude in corners, with the only whinge of note being overassisted steering at highway speeds.

It's certainly one of the front-running handlers in this class. The once canyon-like gap in dynamic ability between small SUVs and hatchbacks is shrinking fast, and Kamiq is a prime example.

Kamiq is a front runner in this crowded class, with VW's T Roc, Subaru's Crosstrek, Toyota's Corolla Cross, Hyundai Kona, Nissan Qashqai and the Kia Seltos.

It's a Goldilocks price/size/specification package, and one of the better drives. Highly recommended. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯨☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Well priced and great resale values
- ✔ Frugal, tractable, refined engines
- ✔ Lots of interior space
- ✔ Loaded with equipment at this price
- ✔ Excellent ride/handling compromise

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Transmission can hesitate when moving off from rest
- ✘ Blind spot monitoring not standard
- ✘ Overly complex air conditioning controls
- ✘ Scratchy AM reception

SPEX (Select)

- Made in the Czech Republic
- 1.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/seven-speed DCT/front-wheel drive
- 85kW of power at 5000rpm/200Nm of torque from 2000-3500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 10.1 seconds (claimed)
- 4.5L/100km highway; 5.5L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 125g/km
- Warranty: Seven years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, autonomous emergency braking, adaptive cruise, lane assist, tyre pressure monitoring, digital instruments, touchscreen infotainment, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, 4 x USB sockets, dual zone air, keyless entry and starting, 17-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 49%

compare with ...

Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Mazda CX-30, Toyota C-HR, Volkswagen T-Roc

SKODA **ENYAQ** FROM **$69,990**

The Skoda Enyaq is priced from $69,990 for the Sportline, which gets a single motor driving the rear wheels.

There's also a sporty RS model ($83,990) with more equipment and a second electric motor for all-wheel drive traction.

Both utilise the sleeker coupe-inspired body. Down the track Skoda says it will also bring the more traditional SUV wagon body to Australia and that prices for that are likely to be cheaper.

The Enyaq Sportline gets tri-zone ventilation, heated front seats, power adjustable driver's seat, wireless phone charger, rear side blinds, four USB-C charge ports, heated steering wheel, panoramic sunroof, powered tailgate, matrix LED headlights and 21-inch alloy wheels. The trim is a microfleece with some touches of leather and there are Skoda extras, including netting in the boot to stop luggage rolling around and an umbrella in the driver's door. There's also a small 5.3-inch digital instrument cluster complemented by a 13-inch central infotainment screen with wireless phone charging and wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

But no over-the-air software functionality increasingly common these days.

A home powerpoint charger is included as is a Type 2 to Type 2 cable able to utilise public AC charging outlets that require a BYO cable.

Buyers of the Sportline can opt for the Ultimate Pack for $6000. It adds adaptive dampers, a Canton audio system, power adjustable passenger seat with memory functionality, surround view camera, heated rear outboard seats, a massage function for the driver's seat and the "crystal face" with 131 LEDs.

All those features are standard on the RS, which also gets unique 21-inch wheels and some styling tweaks, including a different front bumper treatment and unique rear lower bumper.

Inside there are rich materials and finishes while fixed toggle buttons allow for easy selection of major functions.

In the rear the compartmented organiser on the floor steals middle row footspace. Fortunately it's removable, although headroom is encroached on by the sloping roofline.

Even the base car with 210kW and 545Nm delivers on performance. There's respectable pulling power that makes for easy acceleration. Crisp response adds to it easygoing nature.

The RS steps up the performance, something that really only makes itself known at higher speeds when calling on maximum acceleration.

We'd be more than happy parking a Sportline in the garage rather than splashing out on the extra motor for the RS.

That RS has a bigger turning circle, too — 10.8 metres versus 9.3m on the Sportline — something that won't help in carparks and for U-turns.

Through corners the Enyaq has loads of grip and is nicely composed.

The suspension fends off big imperfections while cushioning those inside. It's not the plushest mid-sized SUV available but it manages a nice balance between driving enjoyment and everyday comfort.

There's some playfulness punching out of corners, too, with the rear wheels occasionally helping wag the tail.

If you've chosen one with adjustable dampers — either a Sportline with the Ultimate Pack or RS — then you have 15 different levels of adjustment. All of which seems like overkill, which is why there are three pre-sets for Comfort, Normal and Sport.

To be fair, there's a big difference in the ride comfort between the softest and hardest settings, the latter jiggling over repeated imperfections.

None of which will upset the status quo in the electric SUV sphere because it's not playing at the pointy end from a pricing perspective.

Still, its distinctive design, classy cabin and thoroughly respectable list of standard gear should garner interest from those wanting something that stands out from the assembling EV crowd. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Stylish interior with thoughtful extras
- ✔ Crisp performance and decent range
- ✔ Decent driving manners make for an engaging car

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Plays at the pointy end of the mid-sized SUV field
- ✘ Rear seat headroom encroached on by sweeping roofline
- ✘ No over-the-air software functionality

SPEX (Sportline)

- Made in Czech Republic
- Single electric motor/single-speed automatic/rear-wheel drive
- 210kW of power/545Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 6.7 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 561km
- Warranty: 7 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, wireless phone charging, digital radio, power tailgate, 21-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 43%

compare with ...

Hyundai Ioniq 5, Kia EV5, Tesla Model Y, Polestar 2, Volkswagen ID.4

SMART **#3** FROM **$57,900**

Smart is back, bigger than ever. The brand that made its name making two-seat micro cars as a collaboration between Mercedes-Benz and watch brand Swatch has morphed into a maker of SUVs — now with a healthy dose of Mercedes-Benz DNA.

The new Smart only makes EVs following an unlikely partnership between Mercedes-Benz and Chinese giant Geely. The latter owns many brands, including Volvo and Polestar.

Mercedes-Benz looks after the design while Geely provides the electrical architecture and Chinese manufacturing.

The #3 compact SUV is trying to sell on emotion and fun as much as EV substance.

Priced from $57,900 for the entry-level Pro+, the #3 plays in premium territory but comes with a panoramic sunroof, powered tailgate, faux leather, 12.8-inch touchscreen and wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. There's also a range of funky colours — including two-tone options — and three interior colour combos.

The infotainment screen is large and clear, but the fun factor has perhaps been pushed a touch too far.

Cartoon animals — including a persistent fox — are weaved in with menus and icons and a caricature of a globe.

Basic actions such as adjusting the ventilation take some taps of the screen. Look to go further and you're delving into menus. It pays to practice!

The Premium is another $4000 and brings a Beats sound system, head-up display, leather trim, matrix LED headlights and faster AC charging capability (the base model can charge at up to 7.4kW whereas the Premium charges at 22kW; both can do DC fast charging at up to 150kW).

Then there's the #3 Brabus ($70,900) that steps wheels up from 19 inches to 20s and includes various red highlights, including the brake calipers. The trim is a microfibre suede with rivets attached for something different.

There's also a unique body kit and a vent on the bonnet.

Anyone into their performance Mercs will know Brabus has a reputation for creating some of the most potent Benzes with big noise and big performance.

In Smart guise, though, things are more subtle.

Its dual electric motors also pump out more power, with up to 315kW and 543Nm for 0-100km/h acceleration in 3.7 seconds.

Inside, the Mercedes-Benz design nous shines through, especially with the circular air vents and adjustable ambient lighting glowing from the vents.

The five-door is vaguely practical, utilising its dedicated EV architecture nicely to provide respectable head and leg space for those in the back.

The boot isn't quite as accommodating and the miniature frunk — or front trunk — is tiny, good only for very small items.

In Brabus guise the #3 is impressively ballistic in a straight line, piling on pace with the sort of enthusiasm that would embarrass many vastly more expensive ICE machines. It's responsive and quick, blazing to triple digits in a luscious sweep of torque.

Dial up some of the fake engine sounds — some are refreshingly convincing, others more playful — and it adds to the sense of pace.

The Smart #3's 66kWh battery provides 415km of range for the Brabus, 455km for the Pro+ and 455km for the Premium.

The #3 Brabus is slick through corners, too, its 20-inch rubber only yelping when you push the limits.

It can be exciting and agile, although things get lively if you attack corners too vigorously.

If you're expecting Smart 2.0 to be a reboot of the original then think again.

Just like Mini, though, if you weigh up the SUV options for the price of the Smart #3 you start to realise you're paying for the badge and distinctive design. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ It's fun and stands out in a crowd
- ✔ Brabus model is fast
- ✔ Respectably practical
- ✔ Interesting materials and colours inside and out

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's a lot of money for a cute EV
- ✘ Dynamic ability doesn't match straight line pace
- ✘ Infotainment system takes familiarisation

SPEX (Brabus)

- Made in China
- Two electric motors/single-speed auto transmission/all-wheel drive
- 315kW of power/543Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 3.7 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 415km
- Warranty: 5 years/130,000km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 47%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, Xpeng G6, Zeekr X, Mini Electric

SUBARU **CROSSTREK** FROM **$35,490**

Subaru's compact Crosstrek SUV takes over from the popular XV model, and although Subaru claims it's "All New", Crosstrek is more of the same because the concept, packaging and many components are...the same.

Which is no bad thing, because XV was, and Crosstrek still is, unique to the compact SUV class in offering a full-time, all-wheel drivetrain as standard. This gives Crosstrek a considerable advantage over its front-wheel drive rivals when it comes to dynamics, grip and safety in wet, slippery conditions, and on unsealed surfaces. The penalty is higher than average fuel consumption (albeit on regular 91 unleaded) and relatively expensive servicing.

Under the bonnet is an "enhanced" carryover 2.0-litre naturally-aspirated "boxer" petrol engine, plus a mild hybrid version, both matched with a continuously variable automatic (CVT) transmission.

Prices start at $35,490 for the 2.0-litre Crosstrek L; the new X grade is $36,990; R specification is $38,990 and S, tested here, is $41,990.

The mild hybrid Crosstrek L is $39,090 and the S is $45,590.

The main changes from XV are upgraded infotainment and safety tech. The former features a big, 11.6-inch portrait style touchscreen that's a train wreck graphically, while safety smarts include a steering column mounted camera that watches you as you drive. If you take your eyes off the road you get a warning to pay attention. An adaptive speed limiter, which automatically sets the car's speed to the posted limit, plus lane keeping are also standard.

Crosstrek L includes wireless phone charging, dual zone air, USB A and C ports and 17-inch alloys; R adds swivelling LED headlights, 18-inch wheels and 360 degree cameras, while the loaded S variant includes a sunroof, leather-faced upholstery and Tom Tom navigation, which is inept to the point where you just pair your phone instead and use Google Maps.

There's comfortable seating up front, with plenty of driving position adjustment. Rear seat space and comfort are improved, at the cost of a slightly smaller boot, with a high floor. Boot space is tight, and there's no power tailgate.

The 2.0-litre petrol engine/CVT is fine when you're dawdling around the city on a light throttle, but when you want decent acceleration it's a torque-free zone, lethargic and noisy. The CVT uses and wastes a lot of revs to find a sweet spot and takes too much time to respond when you put your foot down.

Crosstrek does have an advantage over its rivals, though, away from the bitumen. X-mode is pseudo low range traction control that operates below 40km/h to maximise traction in mud, snow or gravel, and hill descent control is also standard.

Subaru knows how to do a classy ride/handling compromise, and with the advantage of all-wheel drive, plus a low centre of gravity, rigid body and finely tuned, supple suspension, the Crosstrek displays outstanding roadholding, a balanced, agile attitude when cornering, and a compliant, almost luxurious ride. There's some tyre noise, though, at highway speeds.

XV was one of the compact SUV class leaders, and in most respects Crosstrek still is, but the game has moved on and the 2.0-litre/CVT drivetrain's lack of urge hurts it against rivals such as Toyota's Corolla Cross, the Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Nissan Qashqai and VW T-Roc, all of which offer more enthusiastic, enjoyable performance, albeit with a price premium for all-wheel drive. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Not yet tested
Performance
★★☆☆☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ All-wheel drive
- ✔ Excellent handling and a supple, comfortable ride
- ✔ Loaded with safety technology
- ✔ Comfortable seating
- ✔ Good value
- ✔ High resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Gutless 2.0-litre engine
- ✘ CVT wastes too many revs under acceleration
- ✘ Difficult to find what you want on the infotainment screen
- ✘ Small boot
- ✘ Expensive servicing

SPEX (S)

- Made in Japan
- 2.0-litre four cylinder petrol/CVT/all-wheel drive
- 115kW of power at 6000rpm/196Nm of torque at 4000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 10.5 seconds (claimed)
- 6.0L/100km highway; 9.4L/100km city; 91 regular; CO2 emissions are 165g/km; fuel tank is 63 litres
- Maximum towing weight 1400kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Nine airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, eyesight, blind spot monitoring, adaptive speed limiter, driver monitoring, lane keep assist, 360 degree cameras, 11.6-inch touchscreen, wireless Apple CarPlay, Android Auto and phone charging, digital radio, navigation, leather, sunroof, 18-inch alloys, space saver spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 73%; 5yr: 58%

compare with ...

Toyota Corolla Cross, Mazda CX-30, Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Honda ZR-V

SUBARU **OUTBACK** FROM **$44,190**

OUTBACK
TOURING XT

Spoiler alert: the Subaru Outback drives with a level of refinement and composure not seen with this model before. More on that shortly.

Three models are powered by a 138kW/245Nm, 2.5-litre four-cylinder "boxer" petrol engine matched to a CVT auto with eight "ratios" and all-wheel drive: Outback AWD, priced at $44,190, Outback AWD Sport at $48,690 and Outback AWD Touring at $52,490

New to the lineup is Outback XT, powered by a detuned versionof the hotrod WRX's 2.4-litre turbopetrol engine. It produces a solid 183kW, but its main attraction is 350Nm of torque available from 2000-4800rpm. It will also tow up to 2400kg — 400 kg more than the naturally aspirated 2.5 petrol.

Outback XT Sport is $53,690 and XT Touring is $57,490.

The 2.5 runs on 91 unleaded; the 2.4 turbo requires 95 premium.

Subaru's twin camera "Eye Sight" system includes lane keeping and adaptive cruise control. Blind spot monitoring, a camera that monitors driver eye movement and rear cross-traffic alert are also standard.

The cabin is kitted out with a large tablet-style central infotainment screen, with redesigned controls in response to valid criticism concerning its confusing layout and difficulty in quickly accessing frequently used functions.

The naturally aspirated 2.5 is still a touch underdone on power and bottom end torque, however it is economical and refined.

Outback did the 0-100 km/h dash in 9.5 seconds on our timing equipment, which isn't quick.

This leisurely performance had us wondering how the engine and transmission might cope with Subaru's claimed 2000kg towing capacity, the highest so far on a Subaru Outback, and on par with larger rivals such as the Hyundai Santa Fe and Kia Sorento.

The ride/handling compromise is superb, in part due to a light (1626-1661kg) and very tight body, and the Outback handles rough country roads at speed with comfort and composure few other SUVs can match, but braking performance could have been a touch better.

Our test car pulled up in 39 metres, which is about the same distance as a double cab ute on all-terrain rubber. Given the overall sophistication of the Outback, we were expecting a shorter stopping distance.

The cabin has ample cubbies and storage pockets, and there are USB A and C charge ports for the front seats and another pair for the back seats.

Front and back seat occupants have plenty of room in all directions. This is the most spacious Outback to date. The cargo area is huge, and there's a full size spare wheel under the boot floor.

Outback's elevated stance helps provide a commanding view of the road ahead, and its 213mm ground clearance means you can cover more rugged terrain than most SUVs. Subaru's constant, variable split all wheel drive system gives the Outback great traction and secure roadholding on dirt roads and in wet conditions.

The Subaru Outback is a seriously impressive wagon, and excellent value for money. If performance is a priority, the $5000 premium for XT turbopower is money well spent.

Loyal owners of previous models will feel right at home. Those new to the brand will wonder what they've been missing out on. Highly recommended. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Excellent value for money
- ✔ Lots of occupant and load space
- ✔ A great family car
- ✔ All wheel drive control and grip
- ✔ Comfortable ride and secure, confident handling
- ✔ Loaded with safety tech
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ The 2.5 is just enough engine for a wagon of this size and weight.
- ✘ 2000kg towing? Good luck with that.
- ✘ Frequent, expensive servicing
- ✘ Underbraked

SPEX (Outback AWD)

- Made in Japan
- 2.5-litre four cylinder petrol/CVT/all-wheel drive
- 138kW of power at 5800rpm/245Nm of torque from 3400-4600rpm
- 0-100km/h in 9.4 seconds
- 6.2L/100km highway; 9.3L/100km city; 91 octane; CO2 emissions are 168g/km; fuel tank is 63 litres
- Maximum towing weight: 2000kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, driver attention monitor, lane keeping, emergency steering, adaptive cruise control, speed sign recognition, blind spot monitoring, rear cross-traffic alert, reverse automatic braking, 11.6-inch infotainment screen, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, voice control, dual zone air, 18-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 72%; 5yr: 61%

compare with ...

Volkswagen Passat Alltrack, Toyota RAV4, Mazda CX-5, Honda CR-V

SUBARU **SOLTERRA** FROM **$69,990**

The Solterra mid-sized SUV is Subaru's first EV and a vehicle that shares all but some basic design details with the Toyota BZ4X.

With the exception of the front bumper, badges and some minor specification differences, the two are identical.

Priced from $69,990 plus on-road costs, the base Solterra features all-wheel drive, courtesy of two electric motors. Most rivals at this pricepoint have one motor.

Standard equipment includes 18-inch alloys, power adjustable front seats, heated outboard rear seats, heated steering wheel, digital rear vision mirror, powered tailgate, 360-degree camera, rear cross traffic alert and blind spot warning.

There's also a 7.0-inch digital instrument cluster and a 12.3-inch central infotainment screen, incorporating wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

Touring specification, with the same drivetrain and extra bling including 20 inch wheels, fake leather and a sunroof, costs $76,990.

Servicing is included for the first five years, but Solterra misses out on a standard spare wheel. It's optional.

In a cabin peppered with generic grey plastics, there's Toyota switchgear and tech, including a busy steering wheel that can control many functions. Carpet-like trim across the dash is something different, albeit the sort of conversation starter that may also polarise opinion.

Toyota cloning flows through to the infotainment system and the lack of a volume dial (there are only buttons), while the drive selector involves a pull-up rotary dial.

Up front there's a terrific assortment of storage, including a bag-sized cavity beneath the raised centre console.

It's a handy compartment that also includes USB outlets and in some ways makes up for the odd exclusion of a glovebox. The owner's manual lives in the boot.

You'll have to get used to peering over the steering wheel, instead of through it, at the small digital instrument cluster, too.

In the rear the flat floor is high to accommodate the battery pack. Foot and knee space is good, but the high floor means long legged passenger will squat rather than sit.

The broad, shallow 410-litre boot has an underfloor compartment for the charge cable while a 60/40 split-folding back seat looks after bulky items.

Two electric motors provide a combined 160kW and 337Nm, which translates to respectable thrust with a typical EV effortlessness, although the brake pedal can be touchy and occasionally calls for finesse.

The 71.4kWh battery only provides about 400km of useful EV range.

That's fine for predominantly suburban work, but on road trips, especially when travelling at a power-hungry 100km/h, you may be lucky to get 300km based on our experience with other EVs on highway drives.

Fast DC charging can be done at up to 150kW for a 0-80 per cent charge in about half an hour.

On the road, the Solterra delivers on comfort. It's cosseting over rougher sections and the body is nicely controlled, reducing unwanted jostling.

The steering is less endearing, with a bland mushiness, although at least it's predictable.

Overall, Solterra's dynamic character is inoffensive, if not overly engaging.

There's even a modicum of off-road ability, with X-Mode and Grip Control electronic assistance to keep the wheels driving you forward on low grip surfaces.

The Solterra won't set the EV world alight, but it's true to Subaru's brand promise, and provides an electric alternative to the much-loved Forester. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

Overseas Model Sho

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Quiet and comfortable
- ✔ Well controlled suspension
- ✔ Servicing included in the price
- ✔ Spacious cabin and myriad storage compartments
- ✔ Decent clearance and electronic smarts allows for mild off-bitumen adventuring

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Feels more Toyota than Subaru
- ✘ Short-ish driving range
- ✘ No glovebox
- ✘ High rear floor leaves long legs dangling in the back
- ✘ Spare is optional
- ✘ No remote smartphone app connectivity

SPEX (base)

- Made in Japan
- Two electric motors/71.4kWh battery/single-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 160kW of power/337Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h N/A
- Claimed maximum range: 414km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360 degree cameras, safe exit alert, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition, 12.3-inch infotainment touchscreen, wireless phone charging, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, navigation, heated seats, cloth upholstery, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys, no spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 55%; 5yr: 42%

compare with ...

Toyota bZ4X, Hyundai Ioniq 5, Kia EV5, Tesla Model Y

SUZUKI **JIMNY** FROM **$30,490**

The Suzuki Jimny is simple, tough and cheap, keeping faith with its predecessors in a model line that stretches back 50 years. Priced from $30,490, the Jimny looks too cute and toylike to take seriously, but it's the real 4WD deal.

It runs similar heavy-duty hardware to the ultimate hardcore off-roader, Toyota's 70 Series Landcruiser: separate body on frame construction, part-time 4WD, a dual-range transfer case with manual rather than electronic 2H, 4H and 4L selection and live axles at both ends, sprung with coils.

Old-world mechanicals are overlaid with 21st-century tech, including hill-descent control, hill holding and a traction control-activated limited-slip differential function that works diagonally across both axles.

A 1.5-litre petrol four with a five-speed manual is standard in the $31,990 Jimny GLX three-door, as tested. A four-speed automatic transmission adds $2500.

Jimny Lite, at $30,490, is manual only, with 15 inch steel wheels instead of alloys. Apple CarPlay/Android Auto are now included.

Jimny XL five door manual is $34,990 and the auto is $36,490.

Jimny's ride is fussy and firm, but I've tested a few cars — and a lot of utes — that are less comfortable than the Jimny. Engine noise is intrusive.

Turning up the volume on the tiny two-speaker audio just adds to the racket.

The back seat in the three door is torture for adults. Next to zero usable boot space with all seats up becomes a hatch-sized load area with the seat backs folded, lined in durable grey plastic.

A full-size spare wheel hangs from the light, one-piece, side-hinged tailgate.

Jimny's three-star crash rating is a worry when you dig into the details. According to ANCAP, the cabin "lost structural integrity" in the 64km/h frontal offset crash test, the airbag failed to prevent the driver's head hitting the steering wheel, and chest protection was rated as "weak". Passengers don't fare well, either.

Minimal mass and short gearing allow the 1.5 to shift the Jimny along at a reasonable rate around town, as long as you keep busy with the light, precise gearbox.

It's sluggish below 3000rpm, which corresponds with 100km/h in fifth, so the Suzuki can hold its own on the open road. Expect 6-7L/100km on the highway, and 7-9L/100km in town, on regular unleaded.

Jimny's dimensional DNA makes it inherently twitchy in quick changes of direction, now compensated for — in part — by indirect steering, plus stability control as a safety net.

It is still a handful, even in a straight line, on rough, corrugated dirt roads, where the live axle suspension often loses control, especially at the rear, which can threaten to swap places with the front.

Front disc/rear drum brakes lack power and are wooden in feel.

Although I didn't take it to the beach, the Suzuki would work brilliantly on sand, where weight is your enemy.

In low range, the 1.5 can drag it up all but the steepest inclines without needing to be thrashed.

Wide approach, ramp over and departure angles mean the Suzuki can crawl across gnarly terrain with the big boys. All-terrain tyres would extend its off-road capability far beyond the standard, bitumen-based Bridgestone Duelers' modest limits.

As a good-time off-roader, the Suzuki is in a class of its own.

Take off-road capability out of the equation, though, and you're left with a primitive, unrefined, below-average drive, with highly questionable crashworthiness. ■

STARS ★★⯨☆☆

Safety
★★★☆☆ ANCAP
Performance
★★⯨☆☆
Handling
★★⯨☆☆ (off road ★★★⯨☆)
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★☆☆☆
Value for money
★★★⯨☆
Overall
★★⯨☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Highly capable and great fun off road
- ✔ Well built and durable
- ✔ 1.5 goes OK and runs on regular unleaded
- ✔ Ride comfort is better than it should be

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Poor crashworthy rating
- ✘ Mediocre handling
- ✘ Noisy at freeway speeds
- ✘ Underdone brakes
- ✘ Unsupportive driver's seat and cramped driving position

SPEX

- Made in Japan
- 1.5-litre four-cylinder petrol/five-speed manual/dual-range 4WD
- 75kW of power at 6000rpm/130Nm of torque at 4000rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 5.7L/100km highway; 7.7L/100km city; 91 octane regular; CO2 emissions are 146g/km; fuel tank is 40 litres
- Max towing weight 1300kg
- Warranty: Three years/100,000km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, camera, AEB, lane departure warning, auto high beams, seven-inch touch screen, Bluetooth, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, navigation, voice control, 15-inch alloy wheels, full-size spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 90%; 5yr: 82%

compare with ...

No direct rivals

TESLA **MODEL Y** FROM **$58,900**

Since going on sale in 2022 the Tesla Model Y has been Australia's top selling EV. Now the mid-sized five-seater has come in for a facelift as part of the upgrade codenamed Juniper.

It mimics many changes made to its sister car, the Model 3. However, the Model Y takes on an edgier look inspired by the radical Cybertruck.

The 2025 Tesla Model Y range kicks off with the Rear-Wheel Drive at $58,900, $3000 more than before. But the Long Range AWD version tested here comes in at a sharp $68,900, which is cheaper than it's ever been.

There are 19-inch wheels, a panoramic glass roof, power-adjustable front seats with memory for the driver, a heated steering wheel and dual wireless phone chargers.

Infotainment is handled by a 15.4-inch centre touchscreen. There's no Apple CarPlay or Android Auto, but Tesla's in-house developed software incorporates apps for music streaming, navigation and phone mirroring, alongside fun extras such as karaoke, arcade games and Boombox sound projection.

There's also heated seats front and rear, although the centre rear seat no longer has heating.

This update adds ambient lighting, perforated synthetic leather trim and suede-like trim on the doors.

New for 2025 is an 8.0-inch rear screen allowing passengers to stream video content, play games and adjust the ventilation.

Plus the back seats now fold and adjust the backrest angle electronically.

The excellent premium sound system adds two speakers (15 in total plus a subwoofer) but is no longer on the Rear-Wheel Drive, only the Long Range.

There's also access to the excellent Tesla charging network. Along with over-the-air software updates and a terrific smartphone app — you can use your phone as the key — it leads the way on tech.

As before, the Model Y comes with Autopilot – Tesla's version of adaptive cruise and lane centering; Enhanced Autopilot ($5100) and Full Self-Driving ($10,100) remain pricey software extras.

Like the Model 3 the Model Y now gets frequency selective dampers, which can adjust the damping force depending on the size and intensity of the bump.

It means it no longer jitters and fusses like it used to. The suspension is calmer, the ride more composed. It's not luxury-car plush, but it's far more livable than before, especially over successive bumps.

Cabin noise levels are also hushed thanks to added insulation and softer trim materials that help soak up reverberations.

The Model Y is still among the more athletic SUVs in its class, with sharp steering and a planted feel.

The Rear-Wheel Drive gets a new motor for a slicker 5.9-second 0-100km/h time.

The dual-motor AWD system remains unchanged, with up to 331kW and 559Nm (that's the combined outputs of both motors, although Tesla doesn't officially quote numbers). More power goes to the rear, helping with that athleticism. Tesla claims 0–100km/h in 4.8 seconds, which is 0.2 seconds quicker than before.

Acceleration is smooth and forceful and driving through all four wheels delivers impressive traction.

Tesla has also reintroduced adjustable regenerative braking, allowing the choice between Standard (strong regen) and Reduced.

The Long Range still gets a nickel manganese cobalt (NMC) battery that recommends full charges only when required. The RWD gets a lithium-ferrous phosphate (LFP) battery happy to be topped up regularly.

Claimed range for the RWD increases to 466m or 551km for the Long Range, although as with all EVs expect less in the real world.

Cabin space in the Model Y is still excellent and mostly unchanged, although the load areas have been tweaked. The boot now holds 822 litres, down from 854L.

There's still that minimalist cabin that is an acquired taste. The emphasis remains on the touchscreen, which not only packs in gadgets and gimmicks — dashcam, Sentry mode, games and essentials such as phone and navigation — but also opens the boot, bonnet and glovebox.

New front seats exchange some plushness for bolstering and support and better overall comfort.

This updated Model Y Long Range builds on the strengths that made it the benchmark in the electric SUV category.

Sure, there's a sharper look and classier cabin, but it's the driving experience that has improved most with the Model Y.

Of course, there's also the Musk factor. But those shunning the brand because of the political antics of its CEO will be ruling out an SUV now more convincing than ever. ■

STARS ★★★★½

Safety
★★★★½
Performance
★★★★½
Handling
★★★★½
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★½

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Revised suspension makes it comfortable
- ✔ Plenty of EV punch
- ✔ Class-leading tech
- ✔ Deceptively spacious and practical five-seat body
- ✔ Terrific charging credentials

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ No instrument cluster or head-up display
- ✘ No Apple CarPlay or Android Auto
- ✘ Minimalist interior still an acquired taste
- ✘ It's associated with Elon Musk
- ✘ Short warranty

SPEX (Long Range)

- Made in China
- Two electric motors/single-speed transmission/all-wheel drive
- 331kW of power/559Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 4.8 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 551km
- Warranty: 4 years/80,000km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, heated front and rear seats, ventilated front seats, heated steering wheel, panoramic sunroof, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 59%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Hyundai Ioniq 5, Kia EV6, BYD Sealion 6, Skoda Enyaq, Polestar 4, Cupra Tavascan

TOYOTA **YARIS CROSS** FROM **$31,790**

Toyota's Yaris hatchback has now spawned an SUV variant, the Yaris Cross, which competes in the premium small SUV market against, among others, VW's T Cross, the Subaru Crosstrek, Skoda Kamiq and Mazda CX-3.

Two hybrid drivetrain options are available. The range opens with the $31,790 GX front-wheel drive hybrid. It runs a 1.5-litre three-cylinder petrol engine, which uses the Atkinson cycle for improved fuel efficiency and is mated to a pair of electric motor/generators and a CVT.

All-wheel drive hybrid variants, which use a third electric motor generator to drive the rear wheels, start at $34,790 for the GX.

GXL and Urban model grades add $2200 and $5140 respectively.

Yaris Cross sits on the hatch platform but has a longer wheelbase and larger body for greater interior space.

That said, it's still extremely tight in the back seat and the boot isn't exactly voluminous either, though it does have a handy two position floor in front wheel drive variants.

First impressions are not great. The ugly, bulging dash is swathed in hard, cheap plastics, the driver's seat is a basic, unsupportive perch, there's no covered storage close at hand and just one USB and 12 volt socket.

Still, the elevated driving position does give you clear vision around the car, and you get a big digital speedo so you have no excuse if you get pinged by one of those sneaky hidden speed cameras.

Infotainment includes an eight-inch touchscreen with Apple CarPlay/Android Auto connectivity, voice control and digital radio; GXL and Urban add navigation.

Safety tech in GX includes adaptive cruise, autonomous emergency braking, lane keep assist and speed sign recognition; a March 2025 update added blind-spot monitoring, rear cross-traffic alert and door exit warning

GXL and Urban add parking sensors, surround cameras and rear cross traffic alert.

We tested the front wheel drive hybrid, and as expected its major attraction is great fuel economy. It runs on regular unleaded and can travel for up to half a kilometre or so at speeds up to about 30km/h using the battery/electric motors alone, so around town it will use 3/4L/100km, which is at least half has much as most petrol-powered rivals.

It's as slow as a week of Tuesdays, though, and while the engine is smooth and quiet on a light throttle, if you ask for decent acceleration by pushing to the pedal to the floor all you get is a loud, anguished moan and precious little forward progress.

Ride and handling are OK, but there are some pretty entertaining drives in this class, notably the Ford Puma, Skoda Kamiq, VW T-Cross and Kia Seltos, so the Toyota isn't among the leaders.

That said, its suspension is quite supple and well-controlled, so ride comfort is better than most, and it sits on the road safely and securely.

Low cost servicing is an added attraction with the Yaris.

That said, the small SUV class is very competitive now, and Yaris Cross doesn't quite offer as much performance, space or quality for your money as the value leaders, Skoda's Kamiq, Nissan's Qashqai, Hyundai Kona and the Kia Seltos. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★ ANCAP
Performance
★★☆☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Fuel efficient hybrid power
- ✔ Works best in city traffic
- ✔ Comfortable ride
- ✔ Cheap servicing (during the warranty) and high resale values
- ✔ Toyota reliability

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Sluggish performance and noisy under acceleration
- ✘ Unsupportive driver's seat
- ✘ Ugly dash with few storage spaces or device connectors
- ✘ Tight back seat
- ✘ Tyres lack grip in wet

SPEX (GXL fwd hybrid)

- Made in Japan
- 1.5-litre three cylinder petrol/electric hybrid/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 85kW/260Nm (combined)
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 3.3L/100km highway; 4.2L/100km city; 91 octane; CO2 emissions are 86gkm
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, lane keep assist, surround cameras, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, navigation, voice control, digital radio, digital instruments, LED headlights, 16-inch alloy wheels.
- Redbook future value: 3yr: 81%; 5yr: 65%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-3, Hyundai Venue, Kia Stonic, Nissan Juke, Suzuki Vitara, Chery Tiggo 4

TOYOTA **COROLLA CROSS** FROM **$36,480**

The world's most popular small car over the past 50 years, the Toyota Corolla, now has an SUV variant, the Corolla Cross. It's built on the same platform, has the same wheelbase as the hatch (Corolla sedan's wheelbase is longer) but now comes exclusively with a petrol/electric hybrid drivetrain, with an additional all-wheel drive configuration in the hybrid that employs a second electric motor on the rear axle.

Corolla Cross has a bespoke body that features tall, boxy SUV styling, a high seating position and yields much greater boot space than the hatch, though rear seat legroom remains tight.

Prices kick off at $36,480, which is a few grand more than the old petrol-only model.

For that you get the GX while there's also a GXL ($40,230) and Atmos ($47,030). GXL and Atmos models are available with an all-wheel drive system for another $3000.

Each is powered by the latest generation Toyota hybrid system. In the case of the Corolla Cross that means a 2.0-litre engine and electric hybrid system making a combined 146kW. The petrol engine also makes 190Nm (Toyota doesn't quote a combined torque figure).

Front-drive versions use a claimed average 4.2L/100km while the AWD uses 4.4L/100km.

We're testing the Atmos hybrid front-wheel drive.

While the hybrid is more expensive than the petrol engine that's no longer available it is money well spent, though the extra $3000 on top for all-wheel drive is of no real benefit if you do most of your driving in urban areas.

Although it's not a true EV — because it won't go much further than your front gate on battery power alone — Corolla Cross's hybrid technology is 100 percent reliable and proven, having evolved from the original Prius released in 1997. It produces strong, tractable performance at low and midrange revs — where you do most of your driving — and is considerably quieter and more refined than the petrol version too, especially on the highway.

In city traffic, the hybrid comes into its own, returning 5-6L/100km (on regular unleaded), which is about half the consumption of the old petrol model.

The CVT is smooth and efficient, with much better hookup from a standing start than usual for this type of transmission, while the hybrid drivetrain is self-charging — so you don't need to plug in.

As mentioned previously, a lack of rear seat space is the main problem in the cabin. Toyota's new infotainment system includes (in the Atmos) a 10.5 inch touchscreen, wireless Apple CarPlay and connectivity to a range of interactive services via the my Toyota Connect app. With extra functionality comes greater complexity, so it takes a while to navigate your way around the system. Atmos also gets widescreen digital instruments and wireless phone charging.

Corolla hatch is quite a sporty drive. Corolla Cross is less so, though a claimed 7.7 seconds from 0-100km/h isn't hanging around. A higher centre of gravity and softer suspension delivers a more comfortable, compliant ride than the hatch, in keeping with the SUV brief. That said, quality Michelin tyres and well sorted suspension give the SUV excellent stability and roadholding at highway speeds.

You also get best in class driver assist safety tech, bulletproof Toyota reliability and bargain priced servicing at just $255 a year for the first five years/75,000 km.

The compact SUV class is very crowded now, but Corolla Cross is certainly one of the front runners. The front-wheel drive GXL and Atmos models are the pick of the range. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★ ANCAP
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯨☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯨☆
Value for money
★★★⯨☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Toyota quality, reliability and durability
- ✔ Refined, tractable hybrid drivetrain
- ✔ Runs on 91 regular unleaded
- ✔ Uses about 50 percent less fuel than the petrol model in town
- ✔ Loaded with driver assist safety tech
- ✔ Comfortable ride and tidy handling
- ✔ Cheap servicing

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Tight back seat space
- ✘ New infotainment system takes a while to learn
- ✘ No stand alone EV capability
- ✘ Highway fuel consumption in the hybrid can be slightly higher than the petrol model

SPEX (Atmos hybrid)

- Made in Japan
- 2.0-litre four cylinder petrol/electric hybrid/CVT/front-wheel drive
- 146kW combined system output
- 0-100km/h in 7.7 seconds (claimed)
- 4.5L/100km highway; 4.1L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO2 emissions are 97gkm; fuel tank is 36 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, lane keep assist, rear cross traffic alert, speed sign recognition, 10.5 inch infotainment touchscreen, 12.3-inch digital instruments, wireless Apple CarPlay, wireless phone charging, navigation, leather, sunroof, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys, space saver spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 79%; 5yr: 61%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-30, Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Subaru Crosstrek, Honda ZR-V, Toyota C-HR

TOYOTA **RAV4** FROM **$42,260**

The Toyota RAV4 is now hybrid only, something that has seen prices step up - although to be fair most buyers were more than happy to pay.

Front-wheel drive hybrids, with a 2.5-litre engine/twin electric motor generators/continuously variable automatic powertrain (also used in the Camry hybrid), start at $42,260 for the GX; GXL is $45,810, XSE is $49,585 and Cruiser is $51,410. All-wheel drive GX hybrid, with a third electric motor at the rear, is $45,260. GXL is $48,810, XSE is $52,585, Cruiser is $54,410 and Edge is $58,360.

We're testing the hybrid Cruiser all-wheel drive. It comes with leather seat facings and door trims, power adjustable, heated front seats, a sunroof, JBL audio, power tailgate and dual zone air.

Infotainment includes a 10.5-inch touchscreen (up from 8 inches on GX and GXL models), voice control, navigation, digital radio, five USB sockets (two in the rear) and wireless phone charging.

You're seated in a luxurious armchair, facing a well-coordinated, stylish dash, with plenty of handy storage and a bright touchscreen with big, easy to hit icons plus a set of manual controls.

Rear seat legroom is expansive and Toyota claims class leading boot space as well.

Smooth and supple, especially around town, the ride can become a little crashy on rough roads at speed, where the soft front end occasionally runs out of travel on nasty bumps.

All models include AEB, lane keeping, adaptive cruise and blind spot monitoring. Cruiser adds surround camera coverage.

Electricity gets the hybrid smartly and smoothly off the line; petrol power kicks in shortly thereafter.

Combined output of 163kW is high for the class, and while the Cruiser weighs in at a hefty 1745kg, the hybrid's strong, broad torque delivery, and a responsive CVT, also contribute to impressive performance.

Smooth and quiet in cruise mode, the engine does get pretty vocal under acceleration.

You can drive up to about a kilometre on flat terrain using battery power alone, as long as you stay below 60km/h or so with a gentle right foot.

Around town, expect 5-6L/100km, on regular unleaded, about half the consumption rate of most petrol-powered rivals. Highway consumption is about 7L/100km; those same rivals can match this, or beat it.

In line with Toyota's new found commitment to making its cars enjoyable to drive, the latest RAV's dynamics are much tighter than its sloppy predecessor's, thanks to a stronger body structure, new multilink rear suspension, wider tracks and, in the hybrid, a low, centred mass.

Light, precise steering and powerful brakes are complemented by all-wheel drive — an asset on dirt roads and in the wet — plus automatic braking to control understeer in tighter corners.

Toyota pioneered hybrids and its technology is proven and efficient. The RAV is also cheap to run. If you're shopping mid-size SUVs, RAV4 nails the family wagon brief, and if you haven't previously considered a hybrid, you will after a test drive.

But keep in mind an all-new RAV4 is on the way, due in Australia in the first half of 2026. Sure, it'll be better, but will it be as affordable? Unlikely... ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ A grade safety
- ✔ Roomy, versatile interior
- ✔ Excellent quality and reliability
- ✔ Cheap to run
- ✔ Strong, smooth, efficient hybrid power

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Tyre noise at freeway speeds on certain models.
- ✘ Floaty suspension that can also be harsh over certain bumps.

SPEX (Cruiser hybrid)

- Made in Japan
- 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol electric hybrid/six-speed CVT/all-wheel drive
- 163kW of power (combined)
- 0–100km/h N/A
- 5.8L/100km highway; 5.0L/100km city; regular unleaded; CO_2 emissions are 109g/km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, 18-inch alloy wheels, camera, rain-sensing wipers, Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, dual-zone air, power tailgate, sunroof, lane departure warning, blind spot monitor, automatic emergency braking, radar cruise, lane keeping and departure warning, rear cross-traffic alert
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 87%; 5yr: 78%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-5, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Nissan X-Trail, Subaru Forester, Mitsubishi Outlander, BYD Sealion 6

TOYOTA **BZ4X** FROM **$66,000**

Toyota has dominated the hybrid vehicle business for more than 20 years, but unlike many other makers it has, more recently, been cautious about diving into full-on electrification, claiming that most buyers aren't yet ready to make the EV switch.

Its first EV is the BZ4X, which Subaru also sells as the Solterra.

About the size of a RAV4, this five-seater SUV kicks off at $66,000 plus on-road costs for the base FWD, or front-wheel drive — a variant unique to Toyota. Solterra is AWD only.

If you would rather lease, Toyota offers a 36 month full service lease for around $1775 per month.

Using a single electric motor, the base BZ4X comes loaded with gear including 20-inch wheels, fake leather, smart key entry, heated front seats and a powered tailgate.

There's also a 7.0-inch digital instrument cluster and 12.3-inch infotainment screen with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity.

Toyota Connected Services allows remote monitoring of the car via a smartphone app, which can also activate the air con and locks.

On the safety front, the base BZ4X misses out on blind spot warning, 360-degree camera and rear cross traffic alert — all standard in the Subaru.

The $74,900 AWD variant adds these features as well as a rear motor for all-wheel drive and a JBL sound system, wireless phone charger, heated steering wheel, black design highlights, roof rails and a sunroof.

In Peugeot style, you have to peer over the steering wheel to see the all digital instrument cluster.

Existing Toyota owners will like the familiarity of Toyota controls, although a dial to adjust the audio volume would be better than the buttons on the dash and steering wheel.

The cabin is laced with grey plastics and a generic Toyota flavour, the seats are comfy and everything fits with precision, as you would expect.

There's no glovebox, with storage instead taken care of by a sizeable binnacle beneath the floating centre console. There are various cubbyholes elsewhere, too, including a centre console with a sliding arm rest cover.

Those in the rear get loads of legroom, although taller folk may find their knees unnaturally raised due to the high floor that houses the battery pack.

In FWD guise there's not a whole lot of grunt, just 150kW and 266Nm. The 71.4kWh battery provides a modest 411km of range.

The AWD steps up the performance with 160kW and 337Nm delivering decent thrust and the sort of immediate responsiveness that EVs do so well. Range is also 411km.

The BZ4X won't win a drag race with its prime competitor — Tesla's Model Y — but it's difficult to imagine many RAV4 owners being disappointed with the punch on offer.

On the road, the low centre of gravity helps with the BZ4X's cornering prowess, although the lifeless steering doesn't do much to tingle the senses.

Like Toyota hybrids, the brakes can be overly sensitive on moderate applications, although the stopping power is fine.

It's also respectably comfortable, with a quiet cabin and suspension that does a nice job of soaking up bumps; even multiple imperfections are handled calmly.

And in AWD guise, the 212mm of ground clearance — 30mm more than the FWD — teams with Subaru's excellent traction systems to surprise with its ability in tricky terrain.

While the BZ4X may not set any benchmarks for electric vehicles — especially when it comes to range — it's a competent, well-presented, conservative family wagon. A true Toyota, in other words. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Serene cabin
- ✔ Comfortable and composed on the road
- ✔ Decent occupant space and plenty of storage up front
- ✔ AWD model doesn't mind getting its tyres dirty

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Short driving range
- ✘ FWD variant's performance is pretty sedate
- ✘ Lack of glovebox is odd
- ✘ Rear floor is unusually high and compromises comfort
- ✘ No spare wheel, just a repair kit

SPEX (AWD)

- Made in Japan
- Two electric motors/71.4kWh battery/single-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 160kW of power/337Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h N/A
- Claimed maximum range: 411km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360 degree cameras, safe exit alert, lane keep assist, speed sign recognition, 12.3-inch infotainment touchscreen, wireless phone charging, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, navigation, heated and cooled front seats, fake leather, hands-free power tailgate, 20-inch alloys, no spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 63%; 5yr: 50%

compare with ...

Subaru Solterra, Hyundai Ioniq 5, Kia EV6, Tesla Model Y, Volkswagen ID.4

TOYOTA **KLUGER** FROM **$62,410**

Australia's top-selling seven-seat family SUV for many years, the Toyota Kluger now comes exclusively with a petrol/electric hybrid system, something that makes the price of entry steeper than ever.

That's in part because Kluger hybrids sold in Australia are exclusively all-wheel drive, bringing a price premium over front-drive models available elsewhere.

Kluger GX now starts from $62,410, a full $8000 more than the petrol model that was available in 2024.

Kluger GXL is priced from $71,930 and the Kluger Grande starts from $84,080.

The Kluger is larger than the Kia Sorento and Hyundai Santa Fe, two key rivals. The Hyundai Palisade is a closer match bumper to bumper.

A 2023 update also includes a big 12.3-inch infotainment touchscreen on GXL and Grande, plus 12.3 inch digital instruments on Grande. Wireless Apple CarPlay is also added.

Extendable sun visors are a welcome inclusion and effective at blocking side glare.

While the Kluger lacks glitz — there's a sombreness to the cabin presentation — it at least gets the basics right.

Second row seats have separate air-conditioning controls. Occupants in the third row are kept cool with roof-mounted vents (rivals use less effective floor vents), and those in the second row are cooled by vents in the roof and in the rear of the centre console.

The second row seat tilts and slides for row three access and create more or less space, but the squeezy third row really is for young kids only.

Unlike some other seven-seaters in the segment, Toyota says the curtain airbags offer head protection all the way to and including the rear roof pillar.

The hybrid combines a 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol engine with three electric motors that generate a maximum combined output of 184kW.

Two small electric motors give the petrol engine a boost delivering power to the front wheels, while a larger electric motor drives the rear axles on-demand.

It performs strongly and makes for an easy car around town. On the open road, too, the Kluger is a relaxed and comfortable cruiser.

The Kluger is a big car and it's carrying plenty of kilos — upwards of two tonnes — something that has an influence on how it drives.

Yet it also does a decent job of hiding its mass when it counts. When manoeuvring around carparks, for example, the steering is light.

There's a dullness to the steering on initial applications, something more noticeable with quick direction changes. But the body behaves faithfully, settling into a bend in a reassuring manner.

Toyota claims the Kluger Hybrid can sip as little as 5.6L/100km (about half the old V6's consumption) in laboratory tests. We averaged between 6 and 6.5L/100km, which is remarkable for such a large and heavy SUV — though it runs on 95 octane premium instead of cheaper 91 regular.

The wider and longer footprint delivers a comfortable ride and confident, secure handling. Kluger used to be a barge in corners. It's not now.

While it's an improvement over the previous model, some more pizazz inside would complete the Kluger picture. And it's a shame the hybrid isn't available as a 2WD, something that would sharpen the steep price leap for what is an efficient and practical seven-seater ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★ ANCAP
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Refinement, comfort, roominess
- ✔ Toyota quality
- ✔ Long list of standard equipment and safety tech
- ✔ Cheap servicing
- ✔ Perky performance
- ✔ Great fuel economy in the hybrid
- ✔ Strong resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Hybrid commands a premium price and premium unleaded
- ✘ Row three is pretty tight

SPEX (GXL hybrid)

- Made in the USA
- 2.5-litre four cylinder petrol electric hybrid/CVT/all-wheel drive
- 184kW combined system output
- 5.6L/100km highway; 6.0L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 128gkm; fuel tank is 65 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, adaptive cruise, rear cross traffic alert, speed sign monitoring, digital radio, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, navigation, voice control, five USB ports, heated front seats, three zone air, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys, full size spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 76%; 5yr: 65%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-90, Hyundai Palisade, Kia Sorento, Nissan Pathfinder

TOYOTA **FORTUNER** FROM **$53,775**

Toyota discounted Fortuner by more than $5000 in late 2017 to fire up sales; they took $3000-$4000 of that back with the 2021 update and upped prices again by around $4000 in 2023.

Still, the base Fortuner GX costs $53,775 — more than $24,025 cheaper than the 76 Series GXL wagon with the same 2.8-litre turbodiesel/six speed automatic drivetrain! Poor man's Landcruiser, indeed.

Fortuner GXL costs $58,895 and Crusade, tested here, is $66,755.

In late 2020 Fortuner received the same 2.8 litre turbodiesel/six-speed automatic drivetrain upgrade as Hilux and Prado. Peak power increased 20kW to 150kW and torque by a hefty 50Nm to 500Nm. So it now matches Ford's 2.0-litre turbo Everest.

Of course, Everest's 184kW/600Nm 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel is in a class of its own.

Maximum claimed towing weight is 3100 kg. At Fortuner's gross vehicle mass of 2800kg, (including towball download), its legal maximum trailer weight is 2750kg.

Servicing is required every six months, which is ridiculous.

Despite niceties such as leather faced seats, JBL audio and (the world's slowest) power tailgate, Crusade feels more like $30K than $60K in the cabin — industrial and impoverished, with hard, shiny plastics, (very) fake tree trim, an unsupportive driver's seat, one only USB/12 volt outlet up front and no wireless phone charging.

Only Crusade has blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert. They should be standard across the Fortuner range.

A spacious, elevated middle row, split 60/40, includes 12 volt and 220 volt outlets (no USB), roof vents and low window sills, so kids will have a good view of the world.

Both sides tumble forward for easy access to two kid-sized individual back seats that fold up against each side of the cargo bay when not in use. Setting up or stowing them is fiddly and strenuous compared with rivals' back stalls that fold into the floor; it also compromises carrying capacity.

As with Prado and HiLux, Fortuner drives like an old school 4WD. It feels heavy, ponderous and occasionally nervous in bumpy corners. Over-assisted steering wanders disconcertingly at highway speeds and is prone to mild rack shake on rough roads. Wooden brakes lack power.

That said, Fortuner is considerably less barge-like in corners than the Prado, because it's lighter, lower and has better-controlled suspension. This also translates to a firm and reasonably absorbent, though fussy ride.

The 2.8 is an honest thing. This example was much smoother than in the Hilux we tested, with the extra 50Nm of grunt particularly noticeable where it counts, from idle to 2500rpm. The automatic shifts smoothly and decisively.

Our Fortuner used 10-12L/100km in town. On the highway, it will do 8.0L/100km, getting you close to 1000km from its 80 litre tank.

Off-road, Fortuner does the business easily, as you would expect. It features proper low range gearing — albeit with a loud whine from the transfer case — 216mm of ground clearance, 700mm wading depth and a locking rear differential. The 2.8's strong bottom end is amplified in low range, where it will idle up, down or over just about anything with excellent throttle modulation and smooth, timely gear changes.

Base model Fortuner GX is good value for a tough, no frills Toyota 4WD. Crusade, though, is overpriced, underequipped and an ordinary drive compared with rivals, notably the Mitsubishi Pajero Sport and Ford Everest. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★⯪☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ It's a real Toyota 4WD wagon
- ✔ More grunt and towing ability from the 2.8
- ✔ Good fuel economy too
- ✔ Spacious, comfortable back seat
- ✔ User friendly infotainment

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Crusade is overpriced against Everest and Pajero Sport
- ✘ Drives like an old 4WD
- ✘ Cabin feels like $30K not $60K
- ✘ Lacks driver assist safety tech
- ✘ Six month service intervals

SPEX (Crusade)

- Made in Thailand
- 2.8-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/six-speed auto/dual range 4WD
- 150kW of power at 3400rpm/500Nm of torque from 1600-2600rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 6.8L/100km highway; 9.1L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 201gkm; fuel tank 80 litres
- Maximum towing weight: 3100kg
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, adaptive cruise, JBL audio, lane keep assist, touchscreen, navigation, voice control, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, power tailgate, leather faced seats, 18-inch alloys, full size spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 83%; 5yr: 68%

compare with ...

Ford Everest, Isuzu MU-X, Jeep Wrangler, Mitsubishi Pajero Sport, Toyota Prado

TOYOTA **PRADO** FROM **$72,500**

The latest Prado shares its underpinnings with the LandCruiser and gets retro-infused styling for added boxiness, as well as improved off-road credentials and the ability to tow 3.5 tonnes.

The new Prado follows a familiar formula of pairing a ladder frame architecture with a large five-door body.

The 250-Series Prado is also the first in the lineage with a lift-up tailgate following the relocation of the spare wheel under the back of the car for all models, something that reduces the maximum fuel tank capacity to 110 litres, in turn reducing the range between refills.

As before, the Prado is available as a GX, GXL, VX and Kakadu with prices jumping almost $10K to now range from about $72,500 to almost $99,990. The volume-selling GXL is $78,990 with five seats or $79,990 as a seven-seater.

Sandwiched between the top two luxury focused models is a new Altitude ($92,700) that ups off-road credentials with hardier all-terrain tyres and a front stabiliser bar disconnect system to improve wheel articulation.

The Altitude seats five to maximise luggage space but retains some of the luxury of the seven-seat VX and Kakadu models, including partial leather trim.

Far from the stripper it once was the five-seat GX gets smart key entry, 18-inch alloy wheels, dual-zone ventilation, a 12.3-inch infotainment screen with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto as well as the full safety assist systems including blind spot monitoring, auto braking and exit warning.

The GXL adds a leather steering wheel and heated and ventilated front seats.

The VX adds an electric driver's seat, 14-speaker JBL sound system and a small fridge in the centre console. There are also 20-inch alloys, adjustable dampers, tyre pressure sensors and a larger digital instrument cluster.

The Kakadu gets a panoramic sunroof, heated and ventilated second row seats, heated steering wheel and illuminated side steps.

All Prados get a carryover 2.8-litre four-cylinder turbo diesel now paired to a 48V assistance system.

Unlike fully fledged hybrids the Prado system offers minimal fuel savings. But it allows the stop-start system to operate more frequently, in turn reducing fuel use around town.

It means the bigger Prado uses a claimed average 7.6 litres per 100km, 0.3L/100km less than its predecessor. The difference is more dramatic around town, lowering fuel use about 8 per cent to 8.8L/100km.

The Prado is also the first Toyota that requires AdBlue, a fuel additive to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions.

Inside there's a generic layout with a pair of cupholders and some useful hidey holes but nothing overly innovative.

While it shares its underpinnings with the bigger LandCruiser, the Prado doesn't feel particularly spacious.

It's fine up front, but fixed middle row seats have modest legroom and the middle row occupant has a sizeable hump on the floor.

A high boot floor on five-seat GX and Altitude models robs valuable luggage space, even if the 954-litre capacity seems generous.

On seven-seat variants the third row sits clunkily above that floor and includes a plasticky storage container at the rear of the load area to match the height of the seats. Aftermarket suppliers have fabricated replacement boot floors to better utilise the available space.

New electric power steering transforms the drive, with lighter steering at slow speeds, added meat when cruising and a stable on-centre feel.

The new eight-speed auto also hooks up more assertively helping making the most of the honest but uninspiring engine. It's also quieter and more refined, making for easy touring.

While it can tow up to 3500kg, the payload drops to as little as 230kg if you're lugging the maximum.

The weighty body shudders into larger bumps but is nicely controlled.

Adaptive dampers paired with 20-inch tyres on VX and Kakadu models add terseness in the Sport/Sport+ drive modes and are spongy in Comfort. Prados on 18-inch wheels with passive suspension seem a better mix.

Off-road the driving equation is terrific.

The new Prado is more capable than ever, with terrific rear wheel articulation and nicely calibrated traction control.

It's swift to select low-range gears and the electronic aids — including traction control and Crawl Control (off-road cruise control) — are excellent in the way they step in swiftly and almost imperceptibly.

The latest Prado looks the business, is ludicrously capable off-road and steps up the everyday comfort.

But below par interior packaging and some fussiness in the switchgear and infotainment robs it of excellence some may be expecting given the price rises. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★★
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Immensely capable off-roader
- ✔ Brilliant reputation for reliability and resale values
- ✔ Vastly improve steering and on-road manners
- ✔ Retro-infused styling stands out

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Tight boot space, especially in seven-seat models
- ✘ High prices for what was once an affordable off-roader
- ✘ Low payload makes towing more than three tonnes tricky
- ✘ Previously big fuel tank has shrunk

SPEX (GXL)

- Made in Japan
- Engine/motor details here
- 150kW of power/500Nm of torque
- 8.5L/100km city; 7.0L/100km country; CO2 emissions are 200g/km; fuel tank is 110L
- Standard: 9 airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, navigation, wireless phone charging, digital radio, fake leather, heated and ventilated front seats, power tailgate, 18-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 86%; 5yr: 70%

compare with ...

Ford Everest, Land Rover Defender, Toyota LandCruiser

TOYOTA **LANDCRUISER** FROM **$98,076**

The 300 Series LandCruiser is an expensive beast, with prices stretching from $97,990 for the GX to $146,910 for the Sahara ZX.

All are powered by a 3.3-litre twin-turbo diesel V6 (227kW/700Nm) paired to a 10-speed auto.

That's more grunt than the V8 it replaced and performance has improved in leaps and bounds.

It's smooth and eager, the effortless torque coming on strong from low in the rev range.

Although the new LandCruiser looks like the previous model in a new suit (the wheelbase, width, and turning circle are identical), Toyota says this vehicle is new from the tyres up, including a new chassis.

Standard fare includes wireless Apple Car Play and Android Auto, and some advanced safety aids. Accordingly, the 300 Series LandCruiser has a five-star safety rating.

The basic steel-wheel GX grade ($97,990) and the top two models (Sahara ZX at $146,910 and GR Sport at $146,160) are five-seaters. GXL ($110,820), VX ($122,510) and Sahara ($139,310) are seven-seaters.

To reduce fuel consumption, skinnier 265mm-wide tyres are fitted on all but the base model, which is skinnier again, with 245s.

A 2025 upgrade brought some extra trinkets, including a digital instrument cluster for the GX, exit assist for the GXL and dual 12.3-inch screens for the VX.

The 300 sits taut on the road, without being bone-jarring. You can better feel the body control and the weight shifting in corners compared with the 200 it replaces.

The 300 Series is a touch lighter than its predecessor thanks to extensive use of aluminium in the body (bonnet, front fenders, doors, tailgate, and roof – only the rear fenders and edges of the roof frame are steel) and high-strength lightweight metals in the structure.

However, a smaller fuel tank (110 litres) reduces cruising range even though fuel consumption has reduced.

Payloads are still a sore point at between 660kg and 800kg. Anyone towing the maximum 3.5 tonnes needs to be careful with how much they load onto the car.

Now with electric and hydraulic power-assistance, the steering in the 300 Series is much lighter and easier to manoeuvre. This is especially welcome in shopping centre car parks, and gnarly off-road obstacles, where you can steer with more precision.

Toyota still refuses to make important safety tech standard, which is ridiculous at these prices.

Lane-keeping assistance, blind spot warning and rear cross-traffic alert are not available on GX. Neither are parking sensors.

It's not as refined on the road as a Land Rover Defender (which costs similar money and has LandCruiser-rivalling off-road ability) but it drives better than before.

Toyota LandCruiser fans will love the 300 because it still feels familiar, but it is so much more manageable whether you're in the daily grind or exploring the never-never.

Bulletproof resale values make it all the more appealing. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Much easier to live with day-to-day and on long haul drives than its predecessor.
- ✔ Twin turbo diesel V6 delivers strong real-world performance.
- ✔ Excellent manoeuvrability thanks to relatively short wheelbase.
- ✔ Massive cargo hold in five-seat form.
- ✔ Great off-road capability
- ✔ Very high resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Toyota needs to bring GX and GXL up to speed on safety. Wrong decade to be using basic safety tech as a model walk.
- ✘ Skinnier tyres equals slightly longer braking distances.
- ✘ Payload still marginal if you plan to tow a heavy trailer.
- ✘ No navigation, diff locks, surround cameras or leather for $100,000-plus? Seriously?
- ✘ Very expensive

SPEX (GXL)

- Made in Japan
- 3.3-litre twin turbodiesel V6/10 speed automatic/permanent dual range 4x4
- 227kW of power at 4000rpm/700Nm of torque from 1600-2600rpm
- 0-100km/h in 7.5 seconds
- 7.6L/100km highway; 11.3L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 235gkm; fuel tank is 110 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Ten airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, seven seats, nine-inch touchscreen, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, digital radio, voice control, wireless phone charging, six USBs, rear air conditioning, 18-inch alloy wheels, full size spare.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 83%; 5yr: 69%

compare with ...

Land Rover Defender, Nissan Patrol, Ford Everest, Jeep Grand Cherokee

TOYOTA **70 SERIES LANDCRUISER** FROM **$75,600**

The Toyota 70 Series has dropped the 151kW/430Nm 4.5-litre V8 turbodiesel for 2025 and nows runs a single engine, the 151kW/500Nm 2.8-litre turbodiesel four as also found in Prado, HiLux and Fortuner.

It's available in all four 70 Series bodystyles – 76 wagon (from $75,600), 79 single (from $76,800) and dual cab chassis (from $79,300) and 78 Troopcarrier (from $79,200) – and in the familiar base Workmate, GX and GXL model grades.

Apart from the four-cylinder engine, other changes for the 2024 update included retro-Cruiser style grille and instruments, LED headlights with auto high beam and laughably slow, small touchscreen infotainment with, in the test vehicle, temperamental wired Android Auto (and Apple CarPlay.) Safety tech now includes lane departure warning and speed sign recognition.

Only the 76 wagon has a reversing camera, though.

Equipment levels are as basic as it gets. Workmate features 16-inch steel wheels, skinny tyres, plastic upholstery, hand-wound windows and a hose out interior; GX adds 16-inch alloys with wider rubber; GXL includes front and rear diff locks plus two USB-C ports, cloth upholstery, power windows and central locking.

The cabin is 1980s old school, too. Slider gauges control the ventilation and the sharp corners are a reminder of days gone by and what Japanese cars used to be like. Hey, at least the retro theme matches the exterior!

In most situations, the 2.8-litre/six-speed auto combination delivers superior performance, refinement and economy compared with the V8/five-speed manual.

Those wanting a manual can save a couple of grand on some models; it's a five-speed unit designed for more driver involvement and simplicity in the bush.

On the highway, the 70 Series cruises languidly at 100km/h in sixth, where it's pulling around 2000rpm — the same revs as the short-geared V8 manual in fifth. The four produces 70Nm more torque, but the V8 banger's torque band begins at idle (1200rpm) and runs to 3200rpm, whereas the four kicks in at 1600rpm and drops off beyond 2800rpm.

Beyond any performance variations, though, is the set and forget advantage of the automatic drivetrain, especially when towing and in 4x4 off road mode, where continuous drive and seamless shifting beats slow, long throw, momentum-robbing manual gear changes and, when the going gets really tough, punishing the clutch.

Official combined fuel consumption for the 2.8 is 9.6L/100km. Treat these numbers, and the difference, as fantasy. In the real world, you'll exceed both averages by a considerable margin and the four's economy advantage will be greater than 1.1L/100km in most situations. We averaged 12.9L/100km in the 2.8 GX single cab chassis.

Toyota says both powertrains will pull up to 3500kg, and still be legal at GCM (7010kg) when maxed out at GVM (3510kg), with payloads ranging from 1060kg to 1380kg. Only the Troopcarrier retains the two 90 litre fuel tanks; other models have a 130 litre tank.

In other respects the 70 Series drives as before — like a truck. There are no chassis updates for 2024 and all models retain live axles, front coil/rear leaf suspension, the narrow rear track and Titanic-like recirculating ball steering.

There's not a lot to miss about the 4.5-litre V8, because apart from the lovely sound the V8 makes with an aftermarket 3-inch exhaust, the 2.8-litre four is in most environments a better thing to drive.

The V8 true believers might not like it, but the four proves that less is more. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
Unrated
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★☆☆☆ on road ★★★★☆ off road
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★☆☆☆
Value for money
★★⯪☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ The 2.8 four/six speed auto is easier to drive, on and off road, with superior acceleration and economy
- ✔ High resale values
- ✔ Will tow up to 3500kg legally at max GVM. Most one tonner utes won't
- ✔ Exceptional durability and reliability
- ✔ Arguably the ultimate off road adventure truck

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Way off the pace in safety tech and infotainment
- ✘ It doesn't handle, steer or stop very well
- ✘ Hard, lumpy ride
- ✘ Poverty pack cabin
- ✘ No more 180-litre fuel capacity in 79 models

SPEX (2.8 GX single cab chassis)

- Made in Japan
- 2.8-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/six-speed automatic/dual-range part-time 4x4
- 150kW of power at 3000rpm/500Nm of torque from 1600-2800rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- Combined average 9.6L/100km; CO2 emissions N.A; fuel tank is 130 litres
- Max towing weight 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Five airbags, stability control, AEB, lane departure warning, speed sign recognition, adaptive LED headlights, plastic upholstery and flooring, 6.7-inch touchscreen infotainment, wired Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, 16-inch alloys, 265/70 tyres, full size spare.
- Redbook future values (V8) 3yr: 83%; 5yr: 75%

compare with ...

Ineos Grenadier, Jeep Gladiator, RAM 1500

TOYOTA **TUNDRA** FROM **$155,990**

It may wear a Japanese badge but like all uber large pick-up trucks (these aren't mere utes!) the Tundra comes from the US of A.

Like its rivals, though, it also undergoes an extensive conversion from left- to right-hand drive in Melbourne, stripped to metal and rebuilt.

That's one reason they don't come cheap, the Tundra kicking off at (ouch) $155,990. That Limited gets dual-zone ventilation, 360-degree camera, heated and ventilated front seats, power adjustable front seats with memory buttons, parking sensors front and rear and smart key entry. A 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster is paired with a 14-inch infotainment screen and 12-speaker JBL audio.

There are also 20-inch wheels, although the spare is a space saver.

Toyota also throws in a tow kit, inclusive of the tow hitch and electronic brake controller.

There's also a Platinum $172,990, which gets black design highlights, massaging front seats, real leather (the Limited gets imitation), panoramic sunroof, ambient lighting, head-up display, heating and ventilation for the outboard rear seats and a power-opening tailgate.

It also gets Toyota's unmatched reputation for reliability and access to the largest dealer network in the country.

The Tundra is powered by a 3.4-litre twin turbo petrol V6 hybrid system. The engine makes 290kW and 649Nm and there's also an electric motor making 36kW and 250Nm.

Combined, the two can muster 326kW and 790Nm, which is more than the V8s it competes with. They drive through a 10-speed auto transmission with a dual-range transfer case.

The Tundra sounds beefy and purposeful, the associated rumble a nice touch. And it's loaded with thrust, the hybrid system chiming in with excellent torque the second you graze the accelerator pedal.

It's hearty and responsive, the engine quickly adding to the effortlessness of the electric motor once you sink your right foot closer to the floor.

For regular driving around the suburbs the Tundra sends its drive to the rear wheels.

Dial up 4H and it apportions drive to all four wheels, while 4L has a set of lower gears for rough road crawling.

Despite boasting hybrid tech the Toyota Tundra Limited isn't particularly fuel efficient. While there's no official fuel figures even during gentle driving we were using 13 litres per 100km. With more suburban driving in the mix that increased to 15-16L/100km.

Still, with a 122-litre fuel tank you should still get 800km out of a tank.

On the road the Tundra feels big because it is big. It pokes out of standard parking spaces and needs respect generally when negotiating tight streets.

But the steering is light and visibility respectable by large truck standards; wing mirrors poke out front either front door prominently, adding to the vision.

The rear-end jolts around occasionally when unladen, something common across the ute segment. But body movement is helped by the big wheelbase — the distance between the front and rear wheels — that quells any tendency to pitch.

The 20-inch tyres end up working hard around bends to contain a lot of mass, but ultimately it's well behaved.

Still, it doesn't have the cushiness and compliance of a LandCruiser 300 Series, which is in some ways a Tundra competitor.

The external heft translates to acres of cabin space. A vast centre console means plenty of space for gear, although some cheap plastics don't quite live up to the price tag.

Even a trio of big blokes across the back seat are unlikely to have much to complain about.

It's not as good as carrying loads, though. At 758kg its payload is less than a Hilux.

Instead, the emphasis is on towing, with up to 4.5 tonnes of capacity.

Still, it's a lot of money to get the job done, especially when compared with the Ford F-150, Chevrolet Silverado and Ram 1500 it competes with.

At least it has a terrific drivetrain (albeit thirsty) and Toyota's reputation for reliability and unrivalled dealer back-up.

For many that will be worth the extra spend. But if it's comfort you're chasing, don't ignore the LandCruiser. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★⯪☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ V6 hybrid drivetrain delivers on performance and noise
- ✔ Acres of cabin space
- ✔ Toyota reputation and dealer back-up
- ✔ Comfortable and quiet

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's expensive, even by American pick-up truck standards
- ✘ Cabin doesn't always live up to the price tag
- ✘ Hybrid drivetrain isn't frugal
- ✘ Payload is less than a Hilux

SPEX (Limited)

- Made in United States
- 3.4-litre V6 twin turbo petrol
- 326kW of power/790Nm of torque
- Fuel use is around 15L/100km (there are no official figures); premium unleaded recommended; fuel tank is 122L
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Eight airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, automatic parking, head-up display, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 77%; 5yr: 54%

compare with ...

Ford F-150, Chevrolet Silverado, Ram 1500, Toyota LandCruiser

TOYOTA **HILUX** FROM **$48,420**

Toyota's double-cab 4x4 HiLux pickup range opens with the 110kW/400Nm 2.4-litre turbodiesel/six-speed manual Workmate at $48,420.The six-speed auto adds $2000.

SR grade, with the 2.8-litre turbodiesel, is $52,640/$55,190 and SR5 is $60,670/$63,260.

HiLux Rogue is priced at $71,530.

HiLux is one of those utes that keeps evolving rather than undergoing radical change from model to model. It has legions of faithful fans, as evidenced by very strong resale values.

It was extensively updated in 2021 with the 2.8 turbodiesel producing 150kW of power at 3400rpm (up 20kW) and 500Nm of torque from 1600-2800rpm (up 50Nm). An increase in towing capacity from 3200kg to 3500kg put Hilux up with its main rivals, but it needs to be noted that none of them will legally pull 3500kg when loaded to gross vehicle mass (GVM) because their gross combination mass (GCM) limit will be well and truly exceeded.

The standard six speed automatic's torque convertor's earlier, more aggressive lockup also reduces heat buildup when towing and makes the current Hilux feel a tad more toey than its predecessor. So does the extra 50Nm of grunt, particularly in the 1500-2500rpm zone, where the 2.8's lazy, but deceptively strong pulling power is further enhanced. Under acceleration, though, engine vibration is excessive.

The preivous 2024 update saw mild hybrid assistance as standard on automatic SR5 and Rogue and a $1020 option on SR automatic.

It's there to make the official fuel consumption numbers look good — by 6-10 percent according to Toyota — with the 48-volt system kicking the engine back into life after a stop in traffic, and allowing for extended operation of ancilliaries during a stop, rather than having to keep the engine running.

Toyota makes no claim to improved performance from the mild hybrid update, but the battery does add a bit of urge when you put your foot down.

As a compromise between on and off road ability, HiLux does both pretty well.

The ride is typically lumpy, and handling is generally secure, but unladen the back end of the Hilux can get pretty loose on rough corners and corrugations. All one tonners do this to a certain extent.

Hilux's steering is overassisted and vague on centre.

That said, the Ford Ranger (and its Amarok twin) has raised the bar for one tonner utes. It's easily the best drive on the bitumen, and the 184kW/600Nm 3.0-litre V6 leaves the HiLux's 2.8, and every other four cylinder turbodiesel, for dead.

GVM for SR5 and Rogue is 3050kg and GCM is 5850kg.

However if you add the maximum towing weight of 3500kg to GVM, you get 6550kg — which is 700kg more than the maximum legal GCM. So you'll have to lose payload or get a lighter trailer.

Autonomous emergency braking, lane keep assist, adaptive cruise and automatic emergency services calling via Toyota Connected Services are included, but blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert — standard on Ranger/Amarok and the Isuzu D-Max/Mazda BT50 twins — are fitted only to SR5.

HiLux is still worth a test drive, but if you also take a Ford Ranger V6 (from $68,840) or VW Amarok 3.0-litre V6 (from $73,740) for a spin, chances are you'll be driving one of those out of the showroom instead. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ 2.8 has plenty of grunt
- ✔ Off-road, towing and payload capable straight out of the box
- ✔ Great resale values

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Six month service intervals
- ✘ Reliability issues with the 2.8 engine and drivetrain seem to have been resolved but Toyota's reputation has suffered

SPEX (2.8 SR5 auto)

- Made in Thailand
- 2.8-litre four-cylinder turbodiesel/six-speed automatic/part-time dual-range 4WD
- 150kW of power at 3400rpm/500Nm of torque from 1600–2800rpm
- 0–100km/h N/A
- 7.0L/100km highway; 9.4L/100km city; CO$_2$ emissions are 207g/km; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Stability control, seven airbags, AEB, adaptive cruise, trailer sway control, voice control, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, 17-inch steel wheels, rear camera, vinyl flooring
- SR adds locking rear diff, carpets, chilled/heated storage box, digital radio, rear diff lock. SR5 adds blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, 18-inch alloys, navigation, dual zone air, auto levelling LED headlights
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 81%; 5yr: 73%

compare with ...

Ford Ranger, Isuzu D-Max, Mazda BT50, Mitsubishi Triton, Nissan Navara, VW Amarok

TOYOTA **HILUX GR SPORT** FROM **$74,310**

Toyota's HiLux has owned the one tonner class almost since it was invented, but in 2023 it was knocked off top spot by the Ford Ranger.

Toyota's problem is that while the HiLux is still a good thing, and much loved by owners due to its core Toyota DNA of quality, reliability and durability, it hasn't moved the game forward at the same rate as some rivals.

Look no further than the obvious advantage the Ranger (and its twin under the skin the VW Amarok) now enjoy under the bonnet with the option of a 184kW/600Nm 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel, matched with a 10 speed transmission.

HiLux, meanwhile, battles on with its 2.8 litre turbodiesel four/six-speed auto, which produces 150kW/500Nm — par for four cylinder drivetrains in this class.

The popular HiLux SR5 auto, now with 48V mild hybrid tech, costs $63,260 plus on roads. You can get into a Ranger XLT 3.0-litre V6 — admittedly with less bling, but all the infotainment and safety tech required — for $68,840, or an Amarok Style V6 from $73,740.

If you do the showroom shuffle and test drive all three, you'll realise just how off the pace the HiLux — and every other four cylinder ute — now feels in comparison with the Ford and VW sixes.

Toyota has tried to give the HiLux an image and performance boost with the GR Sport, priced at $74,310.

It's more than just a facelift. Outputs increase to 165kW/550Nm, and the six-speed auto has been recalibrated to suit.

It's noticeable on the road, where the 2.8 retains its lazy, low revving nature but is considerably more responsive from a standing start and the shifts themselves are slightly more aggressive in timing and speed. Paddles are provided.

Excessive vibration under moderate to hard acceleration is a characteristic of the 2.8.

Official fuel numbers are marginally up on the 150kW engine, but the GR Sport remains at the frugal end of the class. That said, its 8.1L/100km combined average makes the Ranger V6's 8.4L/100km look even more impressive.

Chassis upgrades are off-road focussed and include wider tracks, as per the Rogue, with stiffer springs, KYB monotube dampers and the removal of the rear sway bar for increased axle articulation.

Brakes get larger rotors and four piston front calipers, there's a decent bash plate, rock sliders and a factory towbar. Maximum towing weight remains 3500kg, but payload drops from the SR5's 1000kg to 780kg.

Tyres are still relatively bitumen-biased 265/65 17 Bridgestone Dueler ATs on stylish black alloys, with a full size spare.

In the dark-trimmed, man-cave cabin, you get suede/leather upholstery and a heated, power-adjustable driver's seat that's very supportive but pretty narrow and firm in the cushion, so big boys may find it a bit of a punish on the hips. There's lots of red and fake carbon, of course, a sports steering wheel, aluminium pedals, bespoke digital dash and GR Sport badging.

Infotainment is another area where HiLux has fallen behind. An eight-inch touchscreen accesses navigation and wired Apple CarPlay/Android Auto. 360 degree camera coverage, blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert are also standard.

You would buy the GR Sport for the same reasons you would buy any HiLux. It's a Toyota, which means no grief, low running costs, service support everywhere and great resale values. It's peak HiLux, but in today's one tonner market, is that good enough? ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★⯪☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ All the usual HiLux good things
- ✔ Blinged-up body and black alloys look the business
- ✔ 2.8/six-speed auto does it easy and economically
- ✔ Improved body control from more taut suspension
- ✔ Improved braking
- ✔ Strong resale values
- ✔ Cheap servicing

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's expensive and you can buy a V6 for not much more
- ✘ Engine vibration
- ✘ Stiffer suspension makes the ride pretty fidgety
- ✘ Narrow, hard driver's seat cushion
- ✘ Not exactly up to the minute infotainment tech

SPEX

- Made in Thailand
- 2.8-litre four cylinder turbodiesel/six-speed automatic/dual range part time 4x4
- 165kW of power at 3000rpm/550Nm of torque from 1600-2800rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- 7.5L/100km highway; 9.2L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 213gkm; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Maximum towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360 degree cameras, rear cross traffic alert, trailer sway control, eight-inch touchscreen, navigation, leather/suede upholstery, heated front seats, dual zone air, keyless entry and start, 17-inch alloys.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 81%; 5yr: 72%

compare with ...

Ford Ranger, VW Amarok, Nissan Navara, Isuzu D-Max, Mazda BT50, Mitsubishi Triton

VW AMAROK FROM $55,490

The second generation VW Amarok ute is arguably more Ford than Volkswagen.

Priced from $55,490 for the Core with six-speed automatic, Amarok comes out of a Ford factory in South Africa and shares its structure, chassis hardware, electronics and drivetrains with the Ford Ranger.

Some elements are unique to Volkswagen, though, including the seats and most of the design, inside and out.

The model range, for now, comprises base Core, Life, Style, PanAmericana and Aventura variants, all in dual-cab pickup configuration.

Core gets vinyl floors, black bumpers and a 125kW/405Nm 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbodiesel engine. It picks up alloy wheels, wireless phone charging and addresses the major safety shortfalls of the previous model, adding rear airbags and auto emergency braking.

Blind spot warning is not available until you cough up $59,490 for the Life, which also gets a 154kW/500Nm twin-turbo 2.0-litre four but with a 10-speed automatic transmission.

Style is another $10K jump, to $69,740, and has the option of a 184kW/600Nm 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel for $73,740. The base 10.1-inch portrait infotainment screen stretches to 12 inches but still lacks physical buttons, making what should be one step, easy adjustments like recirculating the cabin air become multiple prods of the screen.

The off road warrior PanAmericana V6 is $82,990 and gets black highlights as well as Harman Kardon audio.

The suburban-focused Aventura steps up to $79,990, bringing 21-inch wheels, added chrome and more leather to maximum bling. It's available with the V6 or a 222kW/454Nm 2.3 turbopetrol four (from the Mustang) that trades torque for power.

All models now have a dual range transfer case and locking rear diff to complement sophisticated, multi-mode traction control. Four cylinder drivetrains are part-time, selectable four wheel drive; the V6 is permanent four wheel drive.

You don't have to look far around the Amarok to spot elements shared with the Ranger, but its bespoke brushed metal finishes, high tech instruments/infotainment, quality upholstery and trims and comfortable, supportive driver's seat in Style grade and above raise the cabin luxe factor to new levels for the ute category.

This is topped off with improved back seat space, ensuring adults have decent headroom and legroom.

Gross combination mass is 6.5 tonnes and kerb weight is 2184-2540kg, so the claimed 1.19 tonne maximum payload will be some way north of the actual legal limit if you are towing a 3.5 tonne trailer. Do the towing weight maths carefully, as with any ute.

On the road, the Amarok is still a front runner, keeping in mind its heft and rugged underpinnings mean it's more ponderous than a city SUV. Fluid steering and taut suspension help it maintain its poise on a country road and it's quiet and refined.

On 21-inch wheels the Aventura's ride can jitter over poor quality roads, its low profile tyres consistently transmitting bumps into the cabin. The 18-inch wheels fitted to most models make for a more comfortable, smoother ride.

The twin-turbo 2.0-litre four-cylinder and 3.0-litre V6 engines are identical to those used on the Ranger. The four is refined, frugal, pulls strongly and for most people will be ample. A 10-speed automatic does a good job of keeping the engine in its sweet spot.

The V6 steps it up a notch and is far more refined for quieter cruising. However, existing Amarok V6 drivers may notice less enthusiasm due to a slight drop in power (from 190kW to 184kW) and a significantly heavier body. It's good, but is far more Ford than VW in its character.

Still, like its predecessor, this Amarok is a classy and convincing ute, albeit at a premium price. ▪

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Spacious and classy cabin
- ✔ Confident ute dynamics
- ✔ Large load area
- ✔ Smooth and refined
- ✔ Torquey, frugal engines

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Pricey
- ✘ V6 engine has gone backwards on performance
- ✘ 21-inch wheels hurt ride comfort
- ✘ Fewer buttons means more yelling at the touchscreen
- ✘ Base Core does without blind spot monitoring

SPEX (Style V6)

- Made in South Africa
- 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel/10-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 184kW of power at 3250rpm/600Nm of torque from 1750-2250rpm
- 0-100km/h N/A
- (European WLTP figures) 8.7L/100km highway; 12.6L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 265gkm; fuel tank is 80 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500 kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, adaptive cruise with speed sign monitoring, lane keep assist, blind spot monitoring, surround cameras, 12-inch digital instruments, navigation, wireless phone charging, heated front seats, LED matrix headlights, automatic parking, tub liner, 18-inch alloys, full size spare
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 69%; 5yr: 54%

compare with ...

Ford Ranger, Toyota Hilux, Isuzu D-Max, Mazda BT-50

VW **T-CROSS** FROM **$33,990**

Volkswagen has joined the booming small SUV segment with a high-riding hatchback based on the Polo.

The T-Cross is powered by a 1.0-litre three-cylinder turbopetrol (85kW/200Nm) in the 85TSi Life, at $33,990, the 85TSi Style, at $37,490, and $40,990 R-Line, each paired to a seven-speed twin clutch automatic and front wheel drive.

The same drivetrain is also offered in the Skoda Kamiq, priced from $33,990. The Skoda has a slightly larger body than the VW, though, and more equipment.

Although T-Cross shares the Polo's silhouette — and its dash layout as well — every panel is new and there are significant changes to the interior that add to its practicality.

The rear seat (which splits 60:40) slides forward or back to give you the choice of more passenger knee room or extra cargo space.

The back seats are positioned slightly higher than the front seats, too, for better visibility for passengers and to (hopefully) help prevent the little ones from getting car sickness.

The cargo area is massive, with between 385 and 455 litres of available space (compared to 351 litres for the Polo), depending on the position of the rear seats.

Although the interior has a premium look, some of the cabin plastics are hard to the touch and feel cheap.

However, the dash layout is a modern, logical design with all buttons and dials intuitively positioned.

The infotainment touchscreen also has tuning and volume dials which can be quicker and easier to use on bumpy roads than a steering wheel button or trying to find the right icon to touch on the display.

The test car we drove was equipped with VW's optional digital widescreen instrument display which has a choice of views, though oddly none we found displayed the vehicle speed in a large font. Instead, the vehicle's speed was tucked away in a corner.

Autonomous emergency braking is standard, as is rear cross traffic alert and adaptive cruise — previously a $1200 option —on all T-Cross models.

It's fair to say that the little turbo triple is not going to pin your ears back but it's fine for commuter driving, and has suprisingly long legs on the highway, where it cruises remarkably easily at the legal limit.

Under hard acceleration, it has a thrumming noise typical of three-cylinder engines but it's not too intrusive. When the start-stop system brings the engine back to life when, say, moving away from a set of lights, it gets a bit vocal.

The seven-speed twin-clutch auto is a smooth operator once on the move but there is still some initial hesitation when moving from rest or when trying to perform a quick three-point turn.

Seats are supportive and comfortable and seem to be covered in a hard-wearing material.

Because it's a touch taller than a Polo — and because the tyres have so much grip — T-Cross can lean a little in tight turns or sweeping bends, but it feels surefooted overall.

Ride comfort over bumps and expansion joins in the road was surprisingly impressive despite the fact the test car was equipped with low profile tyres.

Overall, the VW T-Cross is a well-sorted and practical package that, as with most city SUVs, comes with a hefty price premium over the hatchback on which it's based. Test drive with the Honda HRV, Skoda Kamiq, Subaru Crosstrek and Toyota Corolla Cross. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★☆☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★☆☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Roomy, practical cabin
- ✔ Frugal engines
- ✔ Feels secure in corners and comfortable over bumps
- ✔ Sophisticated infotainment
- ✔ Safe and solid

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ One-litre engine won't rip your arms off
- ✘ Runs on premium unleaded, too
- ✘ Twin-clutch gearbox has a few foibles at low speed
- ✘ Some services are expensive
- ✘ Most safety features optional on Life

SPEX (Life)

- Made in Spain
- 1.0-litre three cylinder turbopetrol/ seven-speed DSG/ front-wheel drive
- 85kW of power at 5500rpm; 200Nm of torque from 2000-3500rpm
- 0-100km/h in 10.2 seconds (claimed)
- 4.5L/100km highway; 5.6L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 111gkm; fuel tank is 40 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, lane keep assist, parking sensors, automatic headlights and wipers, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, wireless phone charging, four usb ports, tyre pressure monitoring, 16-inch alloy wheels
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 61%; 5yr: 49%

compare with ...

Skoda Kamiq, Hyundai Venue, Kia Stonic, Mazda CX-3, Toyota Yaris Cross

VW **T-ROC** FROM **$38,990**

A quick glance around any Australian carpark should be more than enough to prove to you that we're well past the days of talking about how the popularity of SUVs will one day overtake that of hatchbacks, sedans and wagons.

The tide isn't so much turning, but has long since turned, and every manufacturer worth its salty share price has been rushing to bring new SUVs to market as quickly as possible.

While other manufacturers have been making hay while the SUV sun has been shining for years, the German giant finds itself unfashionably late to the party. T-Roc has been available in Europe since 2018.

The looming question now, of course, is was the T-Roc worth the wait?

Aiming to be a kind of Goldilocks (not too big, not too small) SUV, the T-Roc sits above the Polo-based T-Cross, but below the bigger, more family-friendly Tiguan.

Perhaps the easiest way to think of it is as roughly Golf-sized, given the T-Roc is based on the brand's most well-known vehicle, while the smaller T-Cross is based on the Polo.

So why not just buy a Golf, I hear you asking?

For three reasons, really; one, you sit higher in the T-Roc, which many people prefer for comfort, easy access, and vision in traffic; two, because you prefer the way it looks, and it is certainly a polished, premium-looking proposition; or three, well, because it's an SUV.

And with the Golf wagon no longer available, the T-Roc is your only option now if you want a wagon bodystyle.

T-Roc City Life, with a 110kW/250Nm 1.4-litre turbopetrol/eight-speed automatic/front wheel drivetrain, is $38,990; Style is $41,990. T-Roc R-Line, with a 140kW/320Nm 2.0-litre turbopetrol that sends drive to all four wheels via a seven-speed dual clutch automatic, is $49,990.

That price is somewhat justified by a healthy feature list, with a heap of safety kit (autonomous emergency braking, adaptive cruise, lane assist, blind-spot monitoring, and sensors front and rear all contributing to its five-star ANCAP rating), the best of VW's interior tech, including the awesomely tech-savvy Digital Cockpit, and that R-line exterior treatment which adds 18-inch alloys, sports suspension and roof rails.

We haven't yet driven the 110TSi T-Roc, but we have sampled its 1.4-litre drivetrain in other models and it does the job just fine, with great economy and adequate performance.

The 2.0-litre's smooth, muscular power delivery, though, proves the T-Roc's most loveable feature, with serious grunt on offer and a 0-100km/h time of 7.2 seconds.

Ease of use is the other order of the day here, with the diminutive dimensions and light-feeling steering making city work a breeze, but without ever feeling so pokey that you're worried about taking it on long road trips.

It might not offer the interior space of the bigger Tiguan, but neither does it feel as tight in the cabin (at least with the whole family on board) as the smaller T-Cross model.

A happy compromise, then, and one that serves up a useable 392 litres of load space with the rear seats in place, or 1237 litres with them folded flat.

The 2.0-litre T-Roc R tops the range, priced from $64,990. It runs Golf R's all-wheel drivetrain and 2.0-litre turbopetrol (chipped for 221kW and 400Nm), with the seven-speed DSG. The 0-100km/h sprint takes just 4.9 seconds. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★⯪☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Design looks premium and polished
- ✔ Tech and safety offering first class
- ✔ Ample grunt on offer
- ✔ Goldilocks size for a young family
- ✔ Drives like a Golf

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Pricey compared to a Golf wagon or a Tiguan
- ✘ Scratchy cabin plastics lower the premium feel
- ✘ DSG transmission can hesitate from rest and stutter in slow moving traffic
- ✘ Some services are expensive

SPEX (R-Line)

- Made in Portugal
- 2.0-litre four cylinder turbopetrol/seven-speed DSG/all-wheel drive
- 140kW of power at 5000rpm/320Nm of torque from 1500-4180rpm
- 0-100km/h in 7.2 seconds (claimed)
- 5.8L/100km highway; 8.5L/100km city; 95 octane premium; CO2 emissions are 155gkm; fuel tank is 55 litres
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Six airbags, stability control, AEB, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, adaptive cruise, lane keep assist, sports suspension, 18-inch alloys, digital instruments, dual zone air, navigation, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, keyless entry.
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 69%; 5yr: 51%

compare with ...

Mazda CX-30, Hyundai Kona, Kia Seltos, Toyota Corolla Cross, Peugeot 2008

VW **TOUAREG** FROM **$89,490**

The second generation Touareg pricing opens at $89,490 for the 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel 170TDi. The same engine, chipped for 210kW, powers the 210TDi Elegance, priced at $103,490, or $113,490 in R-Line specification.

Topping the range is the new Touareg R, priced at $133,490. It runs a plug-in hybrid drivetrain, with a distinctly performance focus: a 250kW/450Nm 3.0-litre V6 turbopetrol matched with a 100kW/400NM electric motor. System output is 340kW/700Nm, the 0-100km/h trip takes a claimed 5.1 seconds and EV only driving range is a claimed 51km.

It might sound like a cliche to say the Touareg has risen to a new level and is more luxurious than before but, to be frank, it's a fair observation on this occasion.

Standard equipment includes power operated memory front seats, four-zone air-conditioning, front and rear parking sensors, 19-inch alloys, a sensor key with push-button start, Apple Car Play and Android Auto.

Safety technology includes low-and high-speed autonomous emergency braking, front and rear cross traffic alert, blind zone warning and radar cruise control with traffic jam automatic stop-and-go.

As with most five-seaters, the Touareg has two ISOFIX mounts for child capsules and three top tether points.

There's no shortage of USB ports to keep everyone's devices charged.

VW's 210kW 3.0-litre V6 is a muscular, responsive engine with deep reserves of bottom end and midrange grunt, good fuel efficiency and effortless everyday driveability, in partnership with the smooth, efficient eight-speed automatic.

It returns 9-12L/100km in town and 6-7L/100km on the highway, where its range exceeds 1000km. It will pull its maximum 3500kg fully loaded, though VW does mandate light towball downloads: 130 kg with five people aboard, and 280kg with two.

Equally impressive as the grunt is the new Touareg's quietness, comfort and refinement. By coincidence I had a new BMW X7 on test at the same time. The VW was quieter.

Comfort and Normal suspension settings deliver a compliant, controlled ride, even on rough surfaces, despite low profile tyres and 20 inch alloys. Sport mode is tolerable, too.

A flat, firm rear bench features adjustable legroom and backrest angle, plus ventilation and two USB connectors.

Boot space is vast, with nearly two metres of floor length available in extended configuration.

To trim weight, VW has used aluminium for the roof, doors, rear fenders and bonnet.

This could party explain why the Touareg feels relatively nimble and takes corners with far greater agility and poise than SUVs of this size usually do.

Overall, the VW Touareg is so luxurious I was expecting it to have soft-close doors.

That's about the only thing stopping it from rubbing shoulders with its German luxury counterparts, which have starting prices that are about $30,000 more expensive but comparable or lesser performance, comfort and equipment levels.

Drive the Volkswagen before you sign up for a BMW X5 or Mercedes GLE. Leave badge snobbery out of the argument and its arguably just as good. Actually, make that definitely just as good. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★½☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★★☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ A bargain compared with Audi Q7, BMW X5 and Mercedes GLE
- ✔ The $8000 optional 15-inch central touchscreen and 12.3-inch curved digital display for the instruments
- ✔ Luxury levels of refinement
- ✔ Hot hatch levels of pace
- ✔ 3500kg towing capacity

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ The price eclipses $100,000 with options
- ✘ Inflatable space saver spare tyre isn't ideal
- ✘ Lacks speed sign recognition increasingly standard on rivals

SPEX (Elegance)

- Made in Slovakia
- 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 210kW of power at 4000rpm/600Nm of torque from 1750-3000rpm
- 0-100km/h in 6.1 seconds
- 6.3L/100km highway; 7.8L/100km city; CO2 emissions are 180gkm; fuel tank is 90 litres
- Max towing weight: 3500kg
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Standard: Stability control, eight airbags, AEB, adaptive cruise with traffic stop and go, blind zone warning, front and rear cross-traffic alert, rear camera, tyre pressure monitors, four zone air, power tailgate, navigation, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, adaptive suspension, 20-inch alloys, automatic parking
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 61%; 5yr: 43%

compare with ...

BMW X5, Audi Q7, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Lexus RX, Genesis GV80

VOLVO **EX30** FROM **$59,990**

The Volvo EX30 is one of the many new EV arrivals hovering around the sweet spot of the market. Made in China and priced from $59,990 it provides some traditional luxury competition for the myriad newcomer EVs hovering around $60K.

The compact hatch-cum-SUV also brings lashings of design flair. Plus, there's no shortage of equipment, including dual-zone ventilation, wireless phone charging and a punchy Harman Kardon sound system. For an extra $6300 the Ultra gets a panoramic sunroof, 360-degree camera, powered and heated front seats and a heated steering wheel.

Each of those gets a single 200kW/343Nm electric motor driving the rear wheels.

A dual motor Performance model ($71,290) enables all-wheel drive and boosts combined outputs to 315kW and 543Nm.

In any guise there's also plenty of ways to customize the look.

There are five exterior colours available at no additional cost and you can choose between four interior themes: Breeze, Mist, Pine and Indigo.

There's no leather to be seen in modern Volvos with the emphasis on modern materials and recyclability; the recycled plastics on the doors are interesting. Take the Mist combo, which has some partially recycled wool blend seat trim and door and dash panels made of woven flax fibres from linseed.

Strap yourself in for the tech, though.

It's clear Tesla was the inspiration for a lot of the EX30's technology, from the single 12.3-inch central screen that packages most functions within – including the speedo and instrument cluster – to the credit card-like keys that can be swiped for access and to get the car moving (there's also a regular key, albeit minus buttons; the car senses its proximity and locks and unlocks automatically).

The Tesla cut-n-paste means the centre screen is busy doing just about everything else, from opening the glovebox or boot to adjusting the ventilation.

There's some clunkiness to the functionality, including volume and ventilation adjustments. And there are only two centrally mounted window switches up front. Having to toggle to activate the rear windows is frustrating.

There's an airy Swedish style and simplicity in the minimalist cabin.

At 4.2 metres long the EX30 is shorter than many small hatchbacks, yet it looks after humans fairly well.

While those in the rear get crunched on legroom if there are lanky folk up front, they're compensated with acres of headroom. Three across the rear is optimistic, but the flat floor makes things easier.

The lower centre binnacle between the front seats is also easily accessible from the back and has a handy removable tub. But there's not much covered storage.

The EX30 is the first Volvo EV built on dedicated electric car architecture, something that optimally positions key mechanical components.

Claimed range is up to 462km but closer to 400km is realistic.

It isn't light due to the 69kWh battery pack, but its compact dimensions and lively dynamics make it a fun SUV to zip around in.

Even on optional 20-inch wheels (19s are standard) there's polish to the way it smothers bumps.

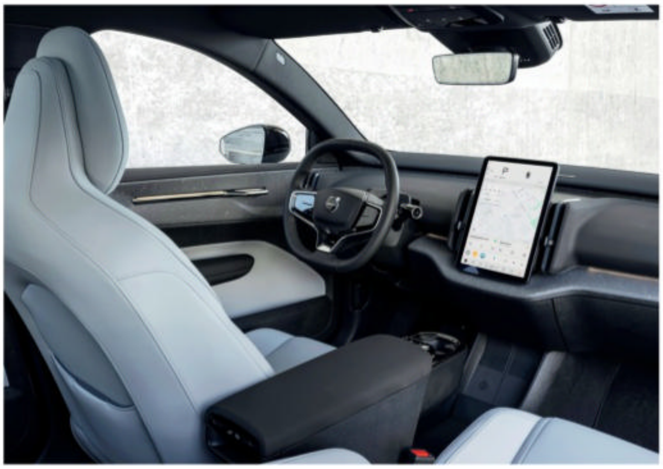
Plus it sits nicely in corners with great grip. Even with one electric motor there's loads of enthusiasm while the dual motor Performance is seriously brisk.

Driving the rear wheels adds playfulness as it squats purposefully when powering out of corners.

It's that fun factor throughout that makes the EX30 an interesting EV alternative. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆



THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Brisk and fun to drive, even as a single motor
- ✔ Engaging and competent driving dynamics
- ✔ Interesting materials and colours without the usual price premiums attached

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Compact body means tight rear legroom
- ✘ Infotainment screen packs too much in
- ✘ Functionality in the cabin isn't always intuitive.

SPEX (Single Motor)

- Made in China
- Single rear-mounted electric motor/ single-speed auto transmission/rear-wheel drive
- 200kW of power/343Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.3 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 462km
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, head-up display, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 63%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

BYD Dolphin, MG4, Hyundai Kona Electric, Peugeot e-2008, Mini Electric, Zeekr X

VOLVO **EX40 ELECTRIC** FROM **$76,990**

The Volvo EX40 Pure Electric takes a familiar compact SUV body - the XC40 - and replaces the oily bits in the base models (which start at $54,990 for the 2.0-litre turbo mild hybrid Plus B4) with batteries and an electric motor (or two).

As with any EV that started life powered by fossil fuels, there's a price premium for the model with batteries.

The EX40 (as opposed to the petrol XC40) starts at $76,990 for a single motor rear-drive version and rises to $81,990 for the dual motor all-wheel drive, known as the Twin.

Those prices have crept up since the XC40 Pure Electric (as it was orginally known) arrived here in 2021. To be fair there have been decent design tweaks and extra gear, including matrix LED headlights. And the move to rename it EX40 brought a swag of extra gear previously reserve for more expensive variants.

Other standard equipment includes 20-inch alloy wheels, smart key access, wireless phone charging, panoramic sunroof, electric tailgate, heated steering wheel, heated seats front and rear, power-adjusted front seats, 360-degree camera and a punchy 14-speaker Harman Kardon sound system.

In line with Volvo's sustainability push leather has been replaced by suede-look seats and fake cow on the steering wheel.

A 12-inch digital instrument cluster is complemented by a 9.0-inch central display that incorporates Android Automotive. While it still has Apple CarPlay connectivity, the onboard mapping is supplied by Google and you can download third-party apps to boost functionality. It requires a data connection, which is included for the first four years; after that you'll be need a subscription.

The dual-motor model adds a second electric motor, for all-wheel drive.

While it's officially a small SUV, the EX40 is bigger than most with loads of head room front and rear and a decent back seat that can cater for adults.

The boot is about ten percent smaller than petrol powered XC40s — its floor is higher to accommodate the batteries — but there's an extra 31-litre storage compartment under the bonnet.

The cabin has a thoroughly Scandinavian flavour with a stylish minimalist approach. There's not even a start button; once the car detects the key inside and a bum on the driver's seat, it's ready to go.

In dual-motor guise the EX40 Electric, with 300kW of power and 660Nm of torque, is deceptively fast, blasting to 100km/h in 4.8 seconds.

We haven't driven the single motor model, which has 185kW and 420Nm.

The XC40 uses lots of electricity compared with most other EVs.

Both get an 82kWh battery pack good for 485km of claimed range between charges.

Riding on 20-inch wheels the X40 is taut but compliant. There's some initial firmness from the low-profile tyres and it's clearly set up for slick cornering.

Expect tyre noise, something more pronounced below 60km/h. There's also booming and rumbling from the suspension that takes the edge off an otherwise quiet cabin.

Still, the EX40 — now its own model rather than riding in the shadow of the XC40 — mounts a solid EV argument, albeit with a price premium. As a luxury EV, the EX40 is one of the more convincing. ■

STARS ★★★★☆

Safety
★★★★★
Performance
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★☆☆
Value for money
★★★⯪☆
Overall
★★★★☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Minimalist, functional cabin
- ✔ Spacious by small SUV standards
- ✔ Dual motor model is seriously fast
- ✔ Cleverly integrated tech, including no start button

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Average resale values
- ✘ Tyre and suspension noise
- ✘ EV rebates don't apply because it's too expensive
- ✘ Converted petrol car package means some compromises
- ✘ More power hungry than other EVs

SPEX (Twin)

- Made in China
- Twin electric motors/82kWh battery/single-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 300kW of power/660Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 4.8 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed maximum range 485km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert, surround cameras, digital instruments, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, navigation, digital radio, wireless phone charging, hands-free tailgate, sunroof, heated seats, Harman Kardon audio, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 57%; 5yr: 43%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, BMW iX1, Mercedes-Benz EQA, Audi Q4 e-tron, Lexus UX300e

VOLVO **EX90** FROM **$124,990**

The Volvo EX90 provides the space and seven-seat functionality of the XC90 it partially replaces but brings a slicker — and quicker— electric driving experience to the large luxury SUV market.

It also has an advanced lidar system as part of an extensive safety suite incorporating 10 cameras and even more radars.

Plus it will be able to recreate the warm tones of London's famous Abbey Road Studios as part of the optional Bowers & Wilkins sound system.

At the heart of the EX90, though, is an SUV that evolves the look of the XC90, one of Volvo's most recognised and loved models.

The new Chinese-made SUV doesn't come cheap, though, priced from $124,990 for the Plus Twin Motor.

For that you get 20-inch alloy wheels, a panoramic sunroof (minus a blind), 14-speaker Bose audio system, electrically adjustable and heated front seats, heated steering wheel and middle row seats, quad-zone ventilation, wireless phone charging and 14.5-inch infotainment screen powered by Android Automotive, which allows third-party apps to be downloaded to the car. It's powered by two electric motors making 300kW and 770Nm.

An Ultra Performance is another $134,990 and includes 22-inch wheels, height adjustable air suspension, adaptive dampers, matrix LED headlights, massaging and ventilated front seats and a 25-speaker Bowers & Wilkins sound system with immersive Dolby Atmos. That B&W system also has an Abbey Road mode that aims to recreate the studio ambience where albums from the likes of The Beatles and Pink Floyd were recorded.

That Performance model ups outputs to 380kW and 910Nm.

There's also a 111kWh battery that provides 570km of claimed range.

The first five years of servicing are included in the price, too.

There's no leather but modern alternatives — including stuff that looks like leather — are fresh and upmarket.

There's Tesla influence throughout, including the 14.5-inch infotainment screen for adjusting the mirrors and steering wheel and even opening the glovebox.

Just two window switches means you have to toggle between winding the front and rear windows.

Having programmable profiles for different drivers make it easy to switch infotainment and seat settings.

And a phone is all you need to get the car unlocked and running.

The EX90's Android Automotive operating system runs the main screen and there's a 9-inch instrument cluster that allows maps to be displayed within its customisable layout, thereby reserving the central screen for infotainment and settings.

While the cabin lacks some of the richness of the XC90 it will initially sell alongside, it screams Swedish minimalism and has some surprise touches, including available whitewash wood that tastefully incorporates ambient lighting for a nighttime glow.

A floating centre console creates a useful bag-ready binnacle on the floor between the front seats, although slim door pockets aren't welcoming to large water bottles.

Space in the first two rows is generous and the middle row has three individually flipping and folding seats.

The third row is best left to kids, though, and also limits boot space once all seven seats are in play.

A useful underfloor compartment adds to the loading functionality, as does a segmented area beneath the bonnet.

Unsurprisingly the EX90 is quicker than most families will ever need.

The Performance blasts to 100km/h in 4.9 seconds, although you need sportiest mode to bypass the dullness in some other settings.

It's suitably swift, although in regular drive mode it takes a moment for the full thrust to swell, translating to initial dullness.

Dual chamber air suspension helps smother bumps nicely and the cabin is quiet and refined.

There's a few taps of the screen to get dial up a firmer suspension setting, in turn better controlling the body.

In any mode, though, there's an emphasis on comfort, something that suits the family-friendly SUV.

That said, low profile tyres hang on tenaciously to endow the EX90 with ample cornering talent. Sure, there's lots of weight (about 2.7 tonnes), but there's enough rubber to ensure it scurries around corners adeptly.

Driver assist systems are well calibrated and the lidar pod at the front of the roof can see at night up to 250 metres down the road for more advanced auto braking functionality.

Claimed range from the 111kWh battery is up to 570km.

The EX90 can charge at up to 250kW for a 10-80 per cent top-up in as little as 30 minutes.

For those ready for the EV leap the EX90 provides a tempting middle ground between the more affordable Kia EV9 and far pricier Mercedes-Benz EQS SUV. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★⯪
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★⯪☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Seven seats in both models
- ✔ Plenty of punch from two electric motors
- ✔ Slick and comfortable driving dynamics
- ✔ Modern materials suit the Swedish-inspired interior

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's a lot more expensive than the XC90
- ✘ Lacks some traditional luxury attention to detail
- ✘ Some odd switchgear and infotainment functionality

SPEX (Plus)

- ● Made in China
- ● Dual electric motors/single-speed automatic transmission/all-wheel drive
- ● 300kW of power/770Nm of torque
- ● 0-100km/h in 5.9 seconds (claimed)
- ● Claimed max range: 570km
- ● Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- ● Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- ● Redbook future values: 3yr: 62%; 5yr: 45%

compare with ...

BMW iX, Mercedes-Benz EQS SUV, Audi Q8 e-tron, Kia EV9

VOLVO **XC90** FROM **$100,990**

The second XC90 is one of the biggest things out of Sweden since ABBA. This almost five-metre-long and more than two-metre-wide seven-seater was the first flagship SUV from Volvo after it was bought by Chinese company Geely in 2010.

The 2025 range opens with the Ultimate B5 Bright, at $100,990. B6 Bright costs $108,990.

Both are powered by a transverse-mounted 2.0-litre four, with turbocharging and supercharging, matched with 48 volt mild hybrid assistance. Volvo has no plans in future to offer any engine with a greater number of cylinders than this. Indeed it has committed to phasing out internal combustion drivetrains in favour of hybrids and EVs altogether by the end of this decade.

Such is life in the new world of low-emission motoring.

The XC90 Recharge Ultimate T8 plug-in hybrid, with a claimed EV range of 77km, is $128,990.

The 2.0-litre force fed four is teamed with an eight-speed automatic and on demand high range only all-wheel drive.

The interior is this Volvo's greatest strength. It's a pleasant environment for driver and passengers alike.

A huge 12.3-inch portrait-oriented screen is the focus of attention in an instrument panel remarkable for its beautifully clean design, premium materials and absence of button clutter.

The 40/20/40 split-folding second-row seat is broad and comfortable and features both a fore-and-aft slider and a built-in child booster in the centre position. Further rearward, the foldaway third-row seats are suitable for adults up to about 170cm tall and are also easy to climb into.

There's enough space for schoolbags and shopping with all seats occupied; with the third-row seats stowed, cargo capacity becomes vast.

Sensibly, the Swedes haven't attempted to make their heavy SUV a sporty vehicle to drive.

The steering delivers little feel and there's a fair amount of body roll when cornering.

Still, the XC90 can be placed accurately into a corner and doesn't grow flustered when driven on a winding road at a decent clip. It's calm, confident and capable enough.

Air suspension is an option but as is usually the case, it doesn't deliver a super-smooth ride at low speeds, lacking compliance as it compresses.

Most buyers will likely find the standard "Touring" setup does a good enough job — and it does.

Although the new XC90 is lighter than the old one, kerb weights are a hefty 2100kg and up so performance is modest.

The 2.0-litre turbopetrol engine is available in two states of tune: 183kW of power and 350Nm of torque in B5 and 220kW/420Nm in B6.

The former is good for 0-100km/h in a leisurely 7.7 seconds; the more potent version knocks one second off that.

Mild hybrid tech does nothing particularly useful for fuel efficiency. It's really there to operate the engine's auto stop/start system and boost off the line acceleration. Expect to use 12-15L/100km around town.

The XC90 introduced two safety technologies since copied by other makers. The first is a collision avoidance system that prevents it being driven across the path of an oncoming car.

The second innovation is a group of seat, seatbelt and airbag deployment features designed to reduce injuries in a run-off-the-road crash.

Stylish, roomy, safe, well-priced and pleasant to drive, the big Volvo works because, unlike most of its rivals, it doesn't try to be a sports car. Its brief is comfort, luxury, space and safety, and it fits that brief very convincingly. ■

STARS ★★★☆☆

Safety
★★★★★ ANCAP
Performance
★★★⯪☆
Handling
★★★☆☆
Quality and reliability
★★★★☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★☆☆
Overall
★★★☆☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Beautiful interior
- ✔ A true seven-seater
- ✔ Luxuriously comfortable
- ✔ Sensible ride/handling compromise
- ✔ Super safety credentials
- ✔ Well priced and loaded

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Unappealing four-cylinder noises
- ✘ It's overweight
- ✘ Feel-free steering

SPEX (Bright B5)

- Made in Sweden
- 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbopetrol/eight-speed automatic/all-wheel drive
- 183kW of power at 5400rpm/350Nm of torque from 1800–4800rpm
- 0–100km/h in 7.7 seconds (claimed)
- 7.0L/100km highway; 10.3L/100km combined; 95 octane premium; CO_2 emissions are 152g/km
- Warranty: Five years/unlimited kilometres
- Fuel tank capacity: 71 litres
- Maximum towing weight: 2400kg
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, 20-inch alloy wheels, child seat boosters, leather, four-zone air, lane departure warning, automatic emergency braking with pedestrian avoidance, radar cruise, 360-degree cameras, automatic reverse parking, parking sensors, hill descent control, automatic headlights with automatic high beam, power tailgate, navigation
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 54%; 5yr: 40%

compare with ...

BMW X5, Mercedes-Benz GLE, Audi Q7, Lexus RX, Genesis GV80

XPENG **G6** FROM **$54,800**

Born from a tech company (it's a familiar theme) fledgling brand XPeng is diminutive compared with rivals, but it has big aspirations.

The first car from the Chinese manufacturer in Australia is the G6, a mid-sized SUV that's playing in the sweet spot of the market.

But there are more coming, including the G9 large SUV and X9 people mover.

Priced from about $54,800 it packs plenty in, including dual cooled wireless phone chargers, powered tailgate, panoramic sunroof, heated steering wheel, heated, powered and ventilated front seats, heated rear seats and a modest Xopera 18-speaker sound system.

There's also a 15-inch infotainment screen with some Tesla influence to its functionality as well as over-the-air software updates.

For that money you get the Standard Range, with a 66kWh LFP battery good for a ho-hum 435km of claimed range.

Shell out another $5000 (most buyers are) for the Long Range and the battery capacity increases to 87.5kWh and switches to the NMC chemistry. The range also jumps to 570km. That's a long time between charges and makes the G6 a thoroughly useful road trip companion.

Adding to its talent is an 800V electrical architecture that allows for DC fast charging at up to 280kW (215kW in Standard Range guise), smashing its rivals.

XPeng says that'll allow a 10-80 per cent charge — almost 400km of range — in 20 minutes.

Inside, the faux leather does a convincing job of looking like the real thing, too, and sets the scene for an upmarket cabin with an ambience above that of many mainstream brands.

The G6 also has size on its side.

Up front there's a broad floating centre console and a lower section that's terrific for bags or odds and ends.

It partly makes up for the lack of a glovebox.

The back seat is huge, with acres of headroom and thoroughly generous legroom. A reclining seatback allows you to adjust the rake to your liking. Like all contenders here it has a flat floor to make life easier for the person in the middle.

The back seats split fold 60/40 and there's some underfloor storage, but it does without under bonnet storage common in EVs.

The single motor in the Standard Range makes 190kW and 440Nm, enough to get to 100km/h in 6.6 seconds. The Long Range ups the power slightly to 210kW while maintaining the same torque, for 0-100km/h acceleration in 6.2 seconds.

In what is a family focused mid-sized SUV it translates to plenty of zip.

Riding on 20-inch Michelin tyres gives the G6 a good foundation dynamically and the XPeng quickly asserts itself as a competent machine.

While the Sport steering has an overweighted numbness, the lighter setting works well.

There are some kilos to contain, but the G6 is also refreshingly capable, even bordering on fun.

It's also relaxed over bumps, making for a competent all-rounder.

The biggest challenge for the newcomer is convincing shoppers to stick it on the shortlist.

With any new brand there's valid trepidation about after-sales support and what the car may be worth years down the track.

At its core, though, the G6 has plenty of substance. ■

STARS ★★★½☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★½☆
Quality and reliability
★★★½☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★★½☆
Overall
★★★½☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Spacious and practical cabin
- ✔ Upmarket flavour throughout
- ✔ Zippy performance and fast charging
- ✔ Loaded with equipment

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ Quirks with the functionality of the infotainment
- ✘ Not cheap for a brand most haven't heard of
- ✘ Concerns about after-sales support and residual values
- ✘ There's no glovebox

SPEX (Long Range)

- Made in China
- Engine/motor details here
- 210kW of power/440Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 6.2 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 570km
- Warranty: 5 years, unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, heated and ventilated front seats, heated steering wheel, power adjustable front seats, power tailgate, 20-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 61%; 5yr: 44%

compare with ...

Tesla Model Y, BYD Sealion 6, Hyundai Ioniq 5, Kia EV6, Volkswagen ID.4

ZEEKR **X** FROM **$49,900**

Yet another newcomer brand from China, Zeekr is part of the giant Geely Group that also owns Volvo and Polestar. So there's muscle behind the little known badge.

The X is the first car from the brand and one that shares much of its underbody hardware with the Volvo EX30.

Priced from $49,900 for the single motor rear-wheel drive, which pitches it squarely against mid-sized SUVs.

That's because Zeekr considers itself a luxury marque with the sort of attention to detail you'd normally find in a BMW or Lexus.

Copper-tinged metallic highlights are indicative of the efforts gone to in selecting materials that live up to the premium promise.

And there's thoughtfulness throughout. Slide your hands on the overhead panel to adjust the brightness and tone of the map lights, for example (you can choose bright or warm white). Or pop out the classy centrally mounted button that provides a hook for bags up front. In the rear there are elegant metallic hooks on the B-pillar for jackets.

Perforations on the door add some visual depth during the day but at night provide the outlets for ambient lighting in each of the doors.

The front seats with race-style integrated headrests are great, too, hugging nicely and providing support around the upper body.

The Zeekr X AWD adds a front motor for all-wheel drive — for a combined 315kW and 545Nm — as well as more equipment and is priced from $62,900.

No shortage of kit, either, including a panoramic sunroof, black roof, powered driver's seat, wireless phone charging and dual zone ventilation. There's also an 8.8-inch digital instrument cluster and 14.6-inch central infotainment unit.

A Convenience pack can be added for $4000 (it's standard on the AWD) and brings a power adjustable passenger seat, memory function for the driver's seat, heated and ventilated front seats, heated steering wheel, ambient lighting and a 13-speaker Yamaha sound system to replace the unbranded seven-speaker system.

The AWD also picks up 20-inch alloys (up from 19), a head-up display and an "intelligent B-pillar display", which is a small circular screen that can be seen from outside the car to show what the battery charge level is at.

That's indicative of the tech, much of it revolving around the central screen that provides a vibrant 360-degree camera and some Tesla inspiration; you adjust the mirrors through the screen and can activate a pet mode (which keeps the AC running when parked while flashing a note on the screen alerting passers-by to the temperature inside) and Sentry, which can use the external cameras to record incidents such as theft or vandalism.

You can also play games on the screen, play a light show outside the car and pump audio through an external speaker. Gimmicky, yes, but a bit of fun too.

It may be a compact SUV — at 4432mm long it's shorter than a Mazda3 hatch — but there's a surprising amount of room inside.

Rear headroom is friendly for even the tallest adults and legroom is thoroughly respectable given the external dimensions.

You don't need to press a start button to get things going; just sit inside with the key and everything comes to life.

Even in rear-drive guise it's punchy and engaging with crisp steering and great agility.

As a dual motor AWD there's loads of power to blast to 100km/h in 3.8 seconds, so you're never left wanting. All-wheel drive traction makes it easy to utilise all its grunt and Continental tyres are suitably sticky.

Along with nicely controlled suspension it makes for an engaging drive, albeit one lacking the aural accompaniments of a petrol engine.

The challenge, of course, will be convincing people to stump up luxury money for an unknown brand with the uncertainty around residual values and after-sales support. ■

STARS ★★★⯪☆

Safety
★★★★☆
Performance
★★★★☆
Handling
★★★★☆
Quality and reliability
★★★⯪☆
Comfort and refinement
★★★★☆
Value for money
★★⯪☆☆
Overall
★★★⯪☆

THINGS WE LIKE

- ✔ Attention to detail inside and upmarket finishes
- ✔ Fun driving dynamics
- ✔ Punchy electric performance
- ✔ Spacious by small SUV standards

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE

- ✘ It's a fair bit of money for an unknown compact SUV
- ✘ Suspension tends towards firm
- ✘ Rubber window seals can creak and groan over bumps
- ✘ There's no glovebox

SPEX (Rear-Wheel Drive)

- Made in China
- Single electric motor/single speed automatic transmission/rear-wheel drive
- 200kW of power/343Nm of torque
- 0-100km/h in 5.6 seconds (claimed)
- Claimed max range: 446km
- Warranty: 5 years/unlimited km
- Standard: Seven airbags, stability control, AEB, adaptive cruise, blind spot monitoring, 360-degree cameras, wireless phone charging, navigation, digital radio, fake leather, power tailgate, 19-inch alloys
- Redbook future values: 3yr: 60%; 5yr: 46%

compare with ...

Volvo EX30, BYD Atto 3, MG4, Smart #1, Mini Electric

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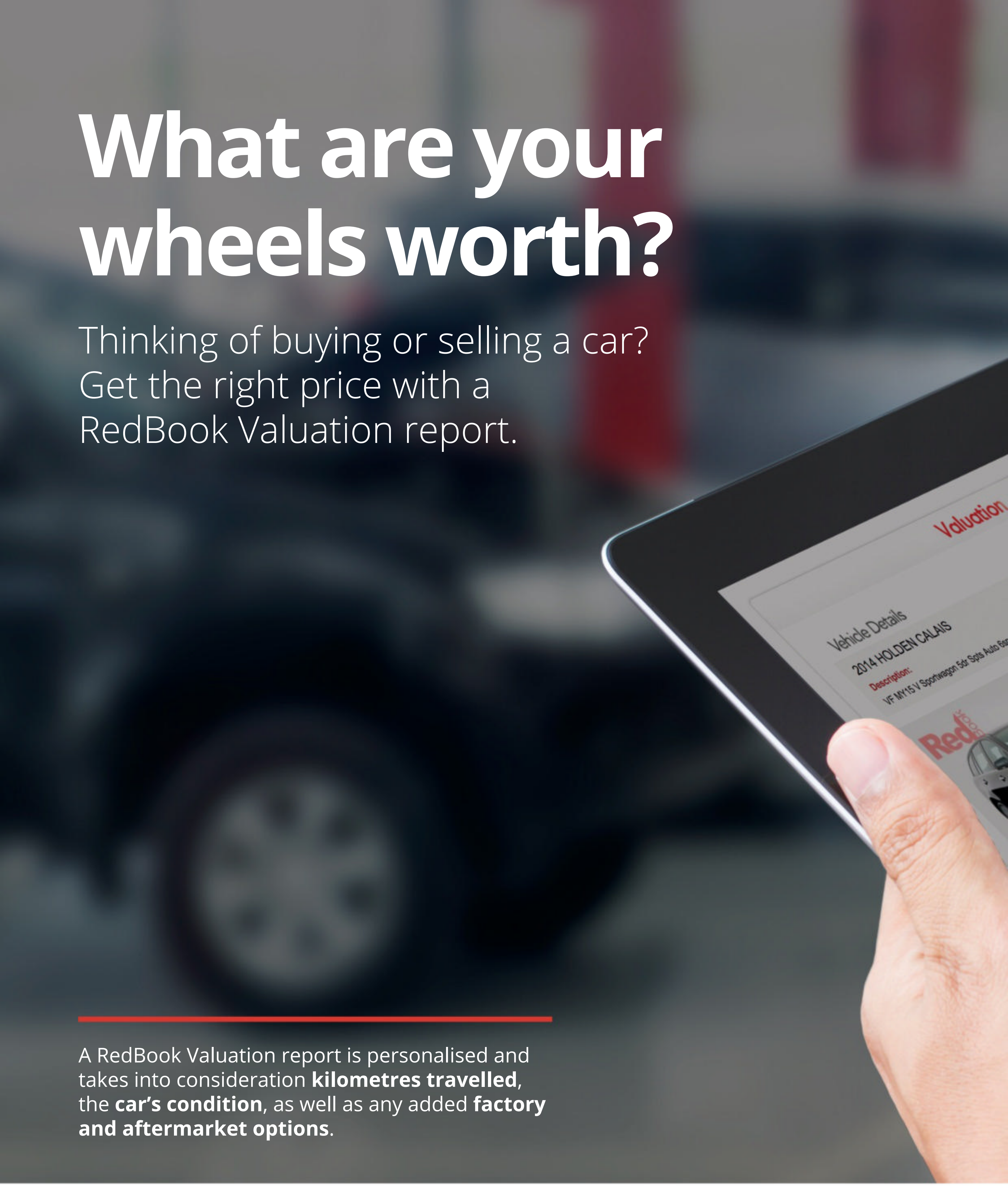
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